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THE WOMAN IN BLACK

BY

LESLIE FORD

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1

The rain streamed steadily down the translucent plastic brick walls of that miracle, or monstrosity, of structural sleight-of-hand on M Street in Washington known as the Executive Building of Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises.

Inside on the fifth and top floor, Ellery B. Seymour, Chief Assistant Executive of the Enterprises, sat behind the plastic simulated-birchwood desk in his private office. The rain gave the outside wall a gray wavering unreality that was heightened by the shadowy mass of the ailanthus tree in the alley. It was a blinded, fish's-eye view of a narrow universe, insulated against sight and sound.

Ellery Seymour frowned. If the rain did not stop and the ceiling rise, Enoch B. Stubblefield's private plane bringing him from Chicago would have to go on, to New York or Richmond, and it was important for him to be in Washington that night. Seymour frowned again, glancing at the wall that divided his office from the open space beyond it, where lesser Executives and the Chief Assistant Executive's secretarial staff were soundless shadows, efficient ghosts moving against an illuminated screen. It seemed to Ellery Seymour, inventor of the process which had built these walls, that he had created a world of monstrous pantomime. He felt it when he went down in his private elevator and through the Executive Corridor to the street, finding the shadows suddenly endowed with substance and life and color. He felt it when his personal secretary materialized through the door that looked like a door only because neatly printed on it was "Ellery B. Seymour, Chief Assistant Executive." She seldom materialized, however. If he flicked the second lever under the edge of the plastic desk, her face appeared on the small screen beside him and her voice came through the communication box underneath it. Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises were the ultimate in depersonalized contact.

There were other levers he could flick and be in instant touch with any of the dozen plants of Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises.

If he flicked down still another, he could talk to Enoch B. Stubblefield himself, riding high in the sky somewhere out of Chicago. It was supposed to be down always whenever Enoch B. Stubblefield was aloft. It was up now, however, and would stay up until Ellery B. Seymour finished the work he had to do.

He picked up the blue-covered document on the desk and looked at it. Across the top was typed "Last Will and Testament," under that his name, "Ellery B. Seymour." He took a pen from the desk holder, drew a line through the initial "B," wrote the word "Richard" above it and put the initials "E. R. S." beside it. He put the pen down, opened the Last Will and Testament of Ellery Richard Seymour, and read it through. It was a single page, with only two paragraphs after the ritualistic preamble. The first paragraph reaffirmed the terms of the Ellery B. Seymour Trust, established to make grants to graduate engineering students under thirty-five, married and in need of financial aid. The second paragraph bequeathed to the Treasurer of the United States all interest held in the name of Ellery B. Seymour in Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises.

Seymour took a sheaf of thin legal paper, closely typed, from his inside coat pocket, released the staples on the will, put the typed sheets in place under the narrow blue flap with the will on top, and stapled them together. He turned back the single sheet, prepared by the Legal Division of Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises, and read through the addendum that he had spent the morning preparing for himself.

"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN.—Aware that the most carefully thought-out plans may fail, from unpredictable circumstances, and that I may as easily fail as succeed in the culmination of the plan I have worked on for a number of years, I am making the following statement. I make it in this form because I realize that in the event of failure there is no probability of my individual survival.

1. I propose to bring about the financial and personal collapse of Enoch B. Stubblefield.

2. I have been in a position to do this many times in the last few years. I did not do it, because the country was at war. The war being over, I am now under a peculiar obligation to proceed.

3. My reasons for doing this are not entirely personal, though

I would be deceiving myself if I pretended that an intense personal animosity was not the basis of my action.

My relations with Stubblefield began nineteen years ago, when I had invented a plastic process which he developed under the trade name 'Structoplast,' and from which all his buildings, including the one in which I now sit, have been constructed. At the time he refused to give me an interview. 'If that damn fool comes here again, kick him downstairs and call the police,' I heard him bellow at his secretary. Six months later, his wife went to a fortune teller-astrologist, who happened to be also my landlady. She told her to tell her husband to watch for a young man with the same initials, born under the same sign of the zodiac, who would bring him great riches. She was trying to get me a job long enough to pay my back rent. I changed my middle initial, moved my birthday up under Sagittarius, and went back to see him. He had a new secretary and saw me.

In the eighteen years since then I have found Stubblefield a cunning, crafty and enormously able individual, a first-rate, absolutely callous promoter. I have also found him childishly vain, an egotist to the point of megalomania, arrogant to his supposed inferiors, incredibly superstitious, completely cold-blooded, cold-hearted and ruthless, and concerned solely with his own self-interest. That is Enoch B. Stubblefield as I know him. Enoch B. Stubblefield the genial, warm-hearted humanitarian, the industrial wizard who builds the workers' recreation center and hospital before he builds the plant, is the product of one of the most high-pressure publicity campaigns any organization has ever conducted, and one of the most expensive. It has been so effective that he now believes it himself, and actually points with self-righteous pride to press releases that he has just paid to have written in his own office.

If that was all I have against him, there would be no point here except personal animosity, and no justification for my writing this.

4. In the last sixteen years, Enoch B. Stubblefield has operated on a big-time basis almost exclusively on public funds. Working on cost-plus in a period of emergency, the sky has been the limit. He is now, however, preparing to organize investor-financed industries which will suck in thousands of small holders who have been fed his daily press releases, and who from the mail already

received in these offices, are eager for the slaughter. The collapse, when it comes, will make Insull look like a public benefactor. I am therefore needling the collapse before one dollar of private capital has actually been contributed.

One-third of the seven million dollars which I intend to take him for, and which is the total amount of free capital this fabulous figure is able to command without borrowing, is my own interest in Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises. If I succeed in my plan, it will be non-existent. If I fail, it becomes the property of the United States Treasury, which can in due course step in and reorganize without a total loss of public money.

5. I regret the few individuals who are necessarily involved in the carrying out of my plan—all but one of them quite innocently, and that one innocently except as she embodies the two qualities that Stubblefield maintains in private conversation motivate all members of the human race: vanity, and cupidity. That has been his successful working hypothesis to date. I have always counted on those qualities in him for the success of my own experiment.

If the rain stops, tonight begins the culminating phase."

Ellery Seymour flicked the third and fourth levers under the edge of the desk. In the translucent brick wall he watched two shadowy figures rise and move, merge into one at the door marked "Chief Assistant Executive," materialize into solid substance as two young women came into his office.

He smiled at them. "I want you to witness my will." He signed the top page, moved it up until the blank line for his signature, under the last sheet, was in view, and signed again. The two young women wrote their names.

"Thank you both."

He smiled at them again. When they had merged into shadows he opened the desk and took out a carbon copy of the single-page will. On it he wrote the number of a safety-deposit box and the name of a small bank in Georgetown. He put it in an envelope, sealed it, put it in another envelope and addressed it to the Legal Division, Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises. He wrote "Private—For Safe Keeping" across the top and signed it "E. B. Seymour." He looked at his watch. It was half-past one. A taxi would get him to

Georgetown before the bank closed. He put the signed will in his pocket, wondering for an instant whether either of the young women had noticed the change from "B" to "R" in his middle initial. It was unimportant, except in the sense that trivialities can assume enormous weight in any delicately and dangerously balanced scheme of things.

At the private elevator he pressed the concealed button. It was all set. Everything but the rain . . . and the rain had to stop. He wanted Enoch B. Stubblefield in Washington that night. They were scheduled to dine at half-past eight with three members of the War Assets Administration in charge of the disposal of a thirty-five-million-dollar plant in Graysonville, Louisiana. Thirty-five million dollars' worth of surplus property . . . going for seven and a half million, cash on the barrel head.

2

It was on a Monday evening, that Enoch B. Stubblefield slipped quietly into Washington, D. C., on his private plane, and I mean quietly like a herd of bull elephants trumpeting through a garden of night-blooming stock in technicolor. His press agent—or I suppose I should say the Executive Assistant for Public Relations, Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises—may have whispered it, of course, to a deaf friend at the Press Club bar. Anyway, it would have been hard for everybody to miss the four limousines that drove up to his hotel bearing him and his innedimenta, which included his wife, his top advisers, his secretarv, his bodvguard, his advisers' secretaries, evervbody's baggage, Scotch oil in cases for the throats of any stray Chinamen and the better parts of two prize steers for the stomach of Enoch B. Stubblefield, the Colossus of the Assembly Line and America's One-Man Industrial Revolution. It must have been by private arrangement with the Weather Man too, because it quit raining for the first time all week, just long enough for the ceiling to rise so his plane could land and not have to go on to New York or Richmond.

It didn't stop long enough for the carrier to deliver me a legible newspaper the next morning. There was only one onaque spot or the sodden gray sheets spread out to dry on the living-room floor.

When I came downstairs. Either by miracle or perhaps by special sort of the Assistant Executive for Public Relations, it was the spot that had Enoch B. Stubblefield's picture on it. He was at the bottom of the steps by his mammoth four-motored plane, shaking hands with his pilot, having already shaken hands, apparently, with his Chief Assistant Executive Mr. Ellery Seymour, who was there to welcome him. Everybody was beaming happily. The general air of triumph extended even to the caption writer. "Rain Floods Georgetown Basements, But Stops for Industrialists to Land at National Airport," I read.

It was a triumph that fell sour on the ears of one Mrs. Grace Hamtram. I live in Georgetown. My basement kitchen has been flooded all the years I've been there, every time there's a long or particularly heavy downpour, but this morning was little short of domestic calamity. All the sugar we have until the next stamp comes will have been carefully stored in the bottom of the cupboard, and is now being swept out to sweeten the lives of whatever creatures live down the overtaxed area drain. I could hear the dark mutterings of Lilac, my cook, downstairs, and the violent swish-swish of her broom. In our twenty years of mutual oppression, she's never learned any more philosophy than I have.

I left the morning paper to go down and help her, my interest in any case in Mr. Stubblefield's triumph over the elements being practically nil. My interest in his Chief Assistant Executive, in fact, was much more. I'd never met Mr. Stubblefield, but I'd met Ellery Seymour a number of times, and recently, now that the gossip connecting him with Dorothy Hallet, who's an old friend of mine, had gotten well above whispering, I'd been getting curious about him. I'd been around the Hallets' house a good deal for the last six or seven years—a charming, quiet man with an unexpected sense of humor and nothing Don Juanish about him that I'd ever seen. I couldn't remember that there'd been a lot of talk about the two of them until Theodore Hallet, Dorothy's husband, had got the brilliant idea, that it would be a good thing if Enoch B. Stubblefield was President of the United States, with Theodore Hallet, naturally, the Zeus from whose forehead he should spring full-grown to Presidential timber. I believe Theodore called it "pre-empting a popular movement."

What was odd about it was that Theodore was usually thought

of, in the jargon of my two sons, as a drip. For a man who'd started with the cards heavily stacked in his favor, he'd done precisely nothing to date. With all the family background and money in the office and rushing back to his Washington office, which consisted of one secretary he made sound like six, who clipped newspapers, and wrote to congressmen, and gave Theodore the illusion that he was the very center of the maelstrom of politics and diplomacy. He was a rather comic figure, on the whole, but he'd never reached actual absurdity until recently, when he'd cast himself in the rôle of king-maker. I'd heard he'd always wanted to be an ambassador, but this was the first time he'd done anything that might bring him that reward of services rendered. And of course a distinguished name and a considerable fortune weren't negligible services, however absurd Theodore himself might seem to people who knew him. I was wondering about it, a little amused, as I went downstairs.

Lilac gave the bottom step another violent swish. "You keep outa here. You keep outa my kitchen."

It was long habit to obey, but even if it hadn't been I would have stopped where I was. When anything's wrong in the kitchen it's always mine, not hers. But she could have it. I started upstairs again. The phone jingling cut off whatever else she was planning to say behind my back. She took it up, said "Hobart 6363," and put it down against her checked apron.

"It's for you. It's that girl. She been callin' up, an' she been comin' here. They somethin' *on her mind*. You go talk to her."

"What girl, Lilac?" I asked, which was a mistake.

"How I know what girl? She don' say and I don' ask. I don' want no more trouble than I already got. That's *your* department. An' you watch you'self, hear?"

Whether or not it was my department, there was some truth in what she said, I had to admit. From the beginning of my presumably friendly association with Colonel John Primrose, 92nd Engineers, U. S. Army (Retired), and not very friendly association with his Sergeant Phineas T. Buck, also Retired, there certainly has been a good deal of trouble, of one kind or another, in and around the house. Living below me on the other side of P Street, in the yellow brick house that a Primrose built and successive Primroses have lived in for some hundred and fifty years, the Colonel

and his Sergeant carry on a subterranean private investigation business, for the Treasury sometimes, sometimes for the State Department, and for various other Government agencies, all very hush-hush, a sort of private pre-OSS cloak-and-dagger enterprise. But they're professionals, of course, and while it's true that I've been mixed up in one or two murder cases, through no fault of my own, under their double-headed ægis, it never occurred to me as I went upstairs that any one could possibly think I could be a partner in the firm . . . except of course Sergeant Buck, who thinks I'd like to be one *via* the marriage trail with his Colonel, which is neither here nor there. However, some one else did seem to think so. That's why I said "My what?" as abruptly as I did. I'd already picked up the phone on my desk in the living room and said "Hello."

"Mrs. Latham? This is Susan Kent—Mrs. William Kent. What . . . what time are your office hours?"

"My *what*?"

"Your office hours, Mrs. Latham."

That's what I thought I'd heard. It may have been the heady atmosphere downstairs affecting me, or maybe I was just stupid. The name Susan Kent meant nothing to me, and the idea of office hours was greatly reminiscent of friends who think it's funny to call up in the course of a late, and usually cheerful, evening to tell me a corpse has been found in the guest-room closet. I've sometimes regretted ever having known Colonel Primrose and Sergeant Buck.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't have office hours. Who is this again, please?"

"Susan Kent." It was a young voice, and not a very steady one. "I don't think you remember me. We live in the Theodore Halletts' cottage. I've met you at Dorothy's a number of times."

"Oh, of course," I said. "I remember you very well."

As a matter of fact I didn't remember her as well as I remembered a picture of her I'd seen a couple of days before in the "This Week's Beauty" series on the society page of the morning paper. I'd thought she was several cuts above the scrapings from the bottom of the barrel that any continued series of local beauties is bound to bring up sooner or later, but it was the note about her that had amused me. "The Bill Kents live in the attractively redecorated stable of the Theodore Hallet mansion on Massachusetts Avenue.

Susan Kent's lovely gray-blue eyes light up when she recalls how lucky they were to get it. 'It's been like a dream,' she says." I was amused because I'd just read it when Dorothy Hallet called up to find out the name of our exterminator. "It's that damned stable, Grace. All the rats are back again."

Susan Kent, however, wouldn't be asking about my office hours for information about rat control.

"Could . . . I see you?" she said then. Her voice was more than unsteady. "It's a friend of mine. She's in a . . . a bad spot, and she really needs some advice."

Well, of course I love to give people advice. It's a weakness I share with humanity, and with about as high an average of takes. On the other hand I was busy. I hesitated.

"It won't take very long, Mrs. Latham. I could come right away."

"All right," I said. "Come along."

At that I didn't expect her to be there before I got the papers picked up—she must have been calling from the drugstore down the street. She put her raincoat on the chair in the hall and followed me along to the living room opening onto the garden at the back of the house. The rain had unupswept her dark curly hair into a tiny fringe of tightly wound tendrils around her face and neck. She was very nervous, or even scared, and she was doing her best to conceal it under a mannered exterior that was a bad imitation of Dorothy Hallet, who's one of those superlatively sleek and lovely women that make most other women look like the pictures you see of Tibetan camels in the moulting season after a long cold winter. Not that Susan Kent looked like that. She was too young and fresh, except that she had purple shadows now under her eyes, which really were lovely gray-blue, wide-set under her long dark lashes. They would have been lovelier if they'd been a little more tranquil.

She had on a gray linen dress that the rain hadn't done much for, and her lipstick had suffered, as if she'd been holding her lips tight together to keep them from trembling. It was so obvious that the "friend" was a fiction that I wondered how long she was going to attempt to keep it up. She seemed too straightforward and intelligent to try to fool either of us, but she was also genuinely frightened, and frightened people do odd things. It's odd, too, how fear makes people shrink into themselves. She looked very small and

alone, sitting there on the edge of the sofa, trying to be a composed and articulate woman of the world.

"Somebody told me you could help me," she said. "I don't know about fees . . ."

I tried to interrupt her, but she'd rehearsed her speech and went quickly on.

"But that doesn't matter. This friend of mine has got herself into a sort of jam, and she . . . she doesn't know what to do. Her husband's a chemical engineer, like mine, and he's with the Rubber Reserve, too. That's how I know her. And she's done an awful thing."

I decided the matter of my fee could wait, but I couldn't help wondering what Colonel Primrose would have thought. I dare say Theodore Hallet's rôle of President-maker was no more preposterous than my own, just then.

"What has she done?" I asked, when she hesitated. She was so badly upset that I tried to ask it as gently as I could.

"Well, it's . . . it's . . ."

The prepared speech had bogged down already. She was desperately trying to search for words to take its place. "This friend . . ."

"Why don't we drop the friend, Susan?" I said.

She started up like a wild little thing caught suddenly in a flash of unexpected light. Her eyes got wider, and she swallowed and moistened her lips.

"You . . . you know already, Mrs. Latham? Has somebody . . ."

I shook my head. "No, I don't know. I just don't think people get as emotionally upset as you are about other people's troubles."

She seemed to shrink even more, but she abandoned her imitation of Dorothy Hallet and started being what she was—a girl in a jam and scared out of her wits.

"I am pretty upset," she said simply. She sat stiffly on the edge of the sofa, her hands tightly clasped over her white bag, looking down at the floor. "Well, this is what's happened, Mrs. Latham. When we first came here, we thought seventy-five hundred dollars a year was an awful lot of money."

She stopped, and moistened her lips again. "That's not really the way to start, because that isn't it exactly. It's this way. Bill's awfully good in his field. He's first rate. I'm not just saying it. Everybody he works with knows it. But he didn't want to come here—he'd much

rather have gone in the Navy. But somebody in the Rubber Reserve persuaded him he could do more here, and I wanted to come to Washington. He taught at a little college—Ottawan in Nebraska—and I got the head of his department to talk to him. Well, he came, and we lived in a horrible, crowded place over in Arlington. I hardly ever saw him. He found a man here he'd known who had a private laboratory, and he worked there Saturday afternoons when he could get away, and Sundays and a lot of nights. He worked all the time."

Her hands tightened in her lap.

"I didn't mind that. I wanted him to get something out of it, though, not just finish the war and go back to Ottawan. I thought if I met the right people, I could do something. It was just a matter of somebody important knowing about him. So I . . . well, I did meet some people. They were awfully interested in what I told them. I . . . I guess I told them too much. They wanted to see what he was doing, but I explained how he was set on going back to Ottawan. They only laughed at that. They said he could really go places in industry. There were big jobs waiting for men like him. That was all I wanted. Anyway . . ."

She was finding it really hard going, but she kept on, her voice tight and not steady.

"Bill used to bring his work papers home at night and put them in the wastebasket for me to take down to the incinerator in the building we lived in. I . . . I showed them to . . . to these people. They were terribly excited. They . . . well, they wanted to . . . to subsidize him. And I thought, if we had more money, we could live nearer the lab, and . . ."

Her voice trailed off. I looked at her, a little puzzled.

"You mean, you took money from them?"

She nodded. "I know it sounds awful, now, but it sounded all right the way these people put it. They were . . . terribly nice."

"And that's when you moved to the Hallets' stable?"

If I'd thought about it at all I'd have assumed that the Bill Kents had an independent income, knowing as I did that even with the OPA the Hallets' stable rented for a ridiculous amount. I was thinking of that when I added, "But didn't your husband notice you were—"

I didn't have to finish. She shook her head quickly.

"He wouldn't notice such things. He's too . . . too unworldly."

Anyway, he . . . he trusts me about everything. It wouldn't ever occur to him to check on anything."

I said, "Oh."

"And anyway, I didn't mean to get involved in any . . . any trouble. All I thought was, he'd get used to nice things and interesting people, and he wouldn't want to go back to Ottawan. I hate it there. But now I'm . . . I'm beginning to see what I've done. A lot of the experiments weren't his. They were from the research pool established for the war. He was checking for the Government; it was part of his job. They're all trying to find a new polymer to make synthetic rubber better and cheaper. He's been working on it ever since he started at Ottawan. Not doing it for himself, but for the war, and the Government now the war's over. I knew what he was doing, but I thought if he'd found it, it would be his own. The new polymer, I mean."

I hadn't the faintest idea what a polymer was, but she seemed to know, and I gathered that if it was something that would make synthetic rubber better and cheaper, and you found it, you would really have found something. It was also plain that Bill Kent of course had no idea at all of what his little lady had been doing. I could see that, depending on what kind of people "these people" were, she had plenty of reason for being frightened, and perhaps on more grounds than one. In fact, as I sat there listening to her, I was a little scared myself.

"But now," she said. Her eyes strained wide open. "There's two things. First, all these Senate investigations you read about. What if they found out that Bill had been taking money from a private source while he's in a . . . a confidential place? Of course, he didn't—but it would look that way, wouldn't it?"

She looked up at me for really the first time. "It would . . . ruin him, professionally, wouldn't it? They'd . . . they'd make hash of him, wouldn't they? The papers, and everything?"

"I'm afraid they could," I said.

She was making a desperate effort to hold on to herself, and for a moment she couldn't go on. Then she said, "And . . . these people I'm talking about. I . . . I'm afraid they think he's got more than he really has got. I just found out, just the other day, that they're trying to get a copolymer plant from the War Assets Administration—that's a plant where they make synthetic rubber. Some of

Bill's friends were laughing about it—except one of them who knows these . . . these people's chief technical man. He said if that man thought he had something, he probably had it, to let them get themselves out on such . . . such a high-priced limb."

She stopped again, and then she said, "And I don't know what to do!"

If it hadn't been so genuinely moving, it would have sounded like a small pathetic wail, at the end of such a story.

There was a clear and definite answer to it, however, and the only one that made any sense, so far as I could see. "I can tell you what to do, Susan," I said.

She started up, hopefully, and shrank into herself again, suspecting a catch in it before I even said what it was.

"What you do is go home, and get hold of your husband, and tell him the whole truth, right away."

She was already shaking her head. "Oh, no." It was hardly audible, no more than a terrified breath she was exhaling. "You don't know him. He'd never forgive me. I wouldn't care if he'd kill me, but he wouldn't. He'd just look at me, and pack his things and leave. He'd never come back. He'd hate me. I can't tell him—I've tried to do that, but I can't."

"But you've got to, Susan," I said. "He's bound to find it out sooner or later, isn't he? It's better if you tell him."

"Oh, he *mustn't* find it out!" she cried. "That's the point. That's what I've got to keep from ever happening, ever."

"But you can't possibly. You can't believe that 'these people' are . . . philanthropists—that they'll sit quietly and let you take them for . . . whatever it's been. They've put cash on the line. You've sold them something. Your husband's responsible, financially—and I doubt if his moral responsibility would ever be considered. Nobody would believe him in the first place. You've done a pretty dreadful thing, and—"

She sprang to her feet in a sudden panic of apprehension. Whether it was what I'd said or whether her ears were strained to a sharper alert than mine and she'd already heard Lilac coming up the steps, I don't know. She was standing there trembling, trying to say something, when the doorbell rang. Lilac came in from the kitchen stairway.

"It's Mis' Hallet, Mis' Grace. She in her *big* car, today."

Susan Kent flashed breathlessly around to me. "Oh, please, Mrs. Latham—don't let her see me here! I've got to get out. I don't want her to know anything's wrong—that would wreck *everything*! Let me out before she comes!"

It was Lilac who took over, not me.

"You come downstairs with me, child," she said. She took Susan by the arm. "Mis' Grace'll go to the door herself. You settle you'self and come with me."

Sometimes I think it's three-quarters angel instead of half that Lilac has mixed with the devil in her. I heard the two of them going down as I went to open the front door for Dorothy Hallet. I was too upset to notice Susan's raincoat on the chair by the dining-room door.

3

"Hello, dear, how are you?"

She stepped from under the umbrella her chauffeur was holding, nodded her thanks to him and came into the hall.

"I wish this damned rain would stop. I'm beginning to feel like Sadie Thompson."

She couldn't have looked less like Sadie. She looked as if she'd just stepped out of an air-conditioned bandbox, ethereally cool and lovely, her beige faille suit fitting her as unwrinkled as an onion skin, the white frills of her blouse crisp and fresh. Her honey-blond hair was smoothly upswept and her brown eyes were as quietly serene as the lineless sun-tanned face they were part of.

"You look harassed, darling. What is it?"

She smiled faintly, and then her glance took in the raincoat there on the chair. The smile faded.

"—That's Susan Kent's . . . is she here now?"

I've known Dorothy Hallet too long to attempt any elaborate lie, so I shook my head, content with a simple one.

"She's gone."

"I'm glad she came, the little idiot. I hope you didn't mind."

"Meaning what?" I asked.

She smiled at me. "Meaning it was me that suggested it. By in-

direction, of course. I'm sure she didn't know it. I'm afraid I did a little fancy embroidering of your build-up as a Secret Agent."

She laughed a little.

"Don't look so mad, dear. She really needs somebody to bat her over the head a couple of times. I hope you gave her some good advice. She needs it, about something. I like to think it's no business of mine, but I'm not sure."

She came on in to the living room. "In fact, I think that's what's the matter with me. I feel like a heel, an absolute heel, and I wish I'd never seen the child."

She shrugged her slight shoulders elegantly.

"I guess it's nothing but an attack of middle-aged conscience, really. I certainly wish I'd never got mixed up in any of it."

"In any of what, Dorothy?" I asked.

"That's what I expected you to tell me. That's why I gave her a long list of your exploits in getting innocent people out of the messes they were in, at dinner the other evening. I thought she'd come to you, and then you could tell me."

"You should have hired me first," I said.

"I don't believe you know a damned thing," she said calmly. "Did she get cold feet? Or she probably decided to go on being cagey. I wish nobody had ever written a column about the Social Game. Too many gals get the idea you can play it without blue chips."

She went over to the windows and stood looking out on the water-logged garden.

"If you do know something, I wish you'd tell me, Grace," she said then, very seriously. "Freddie Mollinson and his gang to the contrary, I'm not out after Susan Kent's hide. I don't know why anybody thinks I'm jealous of the child, when what's bothering me is that I feel I'm responsible for her. If I hadn't met her mother on board a ship, and her mother hadn't written that her child and husband were here and didn't know anybody, and I hadn't been crazy enough to invite them around to a tea, I could skip the whole thing. She'd never have met Ellery Seymour, and she wouldn't be living in my rat-infested stable with Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises paying two-thirds of the rent every month. She'd never have got in what I'm sure she thinks is what they call the Social Game. It's my part in it that's worrying me, Grace. Believe it or not, my motives are quite decent."

She smiled faintly at me. "And don't look so staggered, dear. It's all right for me to have a decent motive occasionally!"

It wasn't that that staggered me. I've never known her motives to be anything but fundamentally decent. Whatever has been said about her or will be said again, for my money Dorothy Hallet is not only the most glamorous woman I've ever known but the best long-haul friend I've ever had. What staggered me was the clear-cut identification of Enoch B. Stubblefield and Ellery Seymour as the "these people" that Susan Kent had got herself involved with. The staggering part of what she'd done was that it was on such a fabulous level. When Susan Kent went out after what she called "the right people," she really went. When she played with fire she didn't take a box of matches—she got herself a raging inferno. It *was* staggering.

"Of course I should never have let myself get drawn in on the stable deal," Dorothy Hallet said. "But I'm a cynic. I thought it was a break for Susan and Bill to get out of that rabbit-warren they were in in Arlington. I may really have thought it was the Great Heart of Enoch B. Stubblefield bleeding at the plight of two deserving children from his own native Nebraska, when Ellery Seymour told me so. But I don't think so. I may even have had the low idea Ellery was finally smitten by a pair of blue eyes and trying to put things on a high-sounding level. But I think I just thought, What the hell, why not? Enoch B. Stubblefield's never put out one thin dime that didn't pay off a thousand per cent—let them do something for somebody just once. As long as the OPA knew the rent was three hundred a month and not one.—And there it is, Grace, and I haven't the foggiest idea of what it all adds up to, except it's something I don't like. There's something badly wrong, somewhere."

I didn't say anything. Thinking of the girl who'd just hurriedly gone, I was definitely disturbed.

"I must be losing my grip," Dorothy said. "Susan Kent didn't look like a designing woman to me. But she took Theodore into camp the first ten minutes she was in our house. He insisted on asking them around to meet Ellery Seymour. And you know Theodore, Grace. He's got the soul of a *maître d'hôtel*."

She smiled a little. "Theodore's all right, but he thinks any woman who'll listen to him talk is a mental giant."

"There's no tinge of green in this, darling?" I asked. I was surprised at the undertone of bitterness in her voice.

She shook her head. "I'm just confused. I don't know what's going on. It seems to me everybody's quit acting like a rational human being. Theodore's simply unbearable—ever since Sunday morning, when he found out Mr. Stubblefield was coming here, he's been like a hen on a hot griddle. I don't know what's got into him. You'd think the Lord of All Hosts was come to town, the way he worries about it. Susan jumps every time you speak to her, Ellery's so withdrawn you hardly know him. I'm appalled by what seems to me to be a completely phony atmosphere. Unless—"

When she stopped I said, "Unless what, Dorothy?"

"I don't know. I'm just talking, and why don't I shut up?" She threw her cigarette into the fireplace and picked up her bag. "Think nothing of it, angel. It's probably just the world's slow stain." She smiled at me, her face tranquil and serene again, her velvety-brown eyes pretending to be amused. "I didn't come here to bleat. I came to ask you to dinner tonight. Ellery Seymour called up yesterday. Mr. Stubblefield was quite pleased about Theodore's big idea and wouldn't it be nice if we had a party for them? Cocktails at six and dinner. They're bringing the liquor, the meat, and most of the guests."

She shrugged.

"If Theodore's going to launch a candidate, it gives him something to do besides write letters about the state of the nation. I just don't like being ordered around. I'm not one of Mr. Stubblefield's foremen and I don't see how I've got in the position of their thinking I am. I like to make out my own guest list, and I like to give my own announcements to the press, if any. I don't like it done for me. Ellery's never acted like this before. However, I've been kindly allowed a few friends of my own. They've invited Susan and Bill Kent. I want you. And I think just for meanness I'm going to add that lovely little scandalmonger Freddie Mollinson. I'll bet you anything he comes."

I shook my head. Freddie Mollinson's a pompous snob, among other things, and I knew as Dorothy did that while Mr. Stubblefield was a particular thorn in his side, he'd break his neck to come to dinner with him if he had the chance.

"In fact, I'll call him right now."

She went over to my desk. The telephone rang just as she started to pick it up. She said "Hello," turned to hand it to me and stopped. "This is Mrs. Theodore Hallet speaking." Her lips tightened a little. "Very well. Mrs. Lawrence Taylor. Cocktails but not dinner. Good-by."

She stood for a moment before she turned back.

"Here we go," she said coolly. "Mr. Stubblefield's secretary adds another guest. Mrs. Lawrence Taylor, she says—whoever Mrs. Lawrence Taylor is. Don't you think it's about time I'm on the pay roll? Didn't somebody say 'What meat does this our Caesar feed on that he has grown so great?' Well, he's not getting meat tonight. He can eat duck and like it, and take his beef back home with him."

She went out into the hall. "You're coming, I need you. Seventy-three . . . long dress, so the cocktail guests will get the word and go on home."

At the front door she stopped. "What are you doing now? Why don't you come downtown and have lunch with me?"

I shook my head. "I've got a luncheon date. Freddie Mollinson's going to be there too, I think."

Dorothy smiled. "Give him my love. Don't tell him I'm going to call him. I'll get hold of him around five."

I closed the door behind her and went back to the basement door. I could hear Lilac talking down there, but it was Sheila, my Irish setter, she was talking to. She heard me and came to the steps.

"She gone, Mis' Grace. She took your old blue umbrella."

I said, "All right," and came back. I was a little relieved about that, but I was very much upset about Dorothy Hallet. I knew she was a complete realist and very wise in the ways of the world, and, if she was disturbed, there was reason for everybody else to be in a complete panic. She's about the sanest person I know and the most level-headed. And of course Susan Kent was in a complete panic. Still, much as I trust Dorothy on a lot of levels, I couldn't believe that Susan Kent's problems, and Dorothy's sense of responsibility for her or them, were the whole story.

On the other hand, I found it hard to believe anything as obvious as the general gossip—not coming entirely from Freddie Mollinson—that in Susan Kent, Dorothy had taken a viper to her bosom and the viper had got away with Ellery Seymour. I have never believed Dorothy's interest in Ellery Seymour was more than friendly. It's

perfectly true that if Theodore Hallet, by some quaint fluke of practical politics, did manage to spearhead a popular move for Stubblefield for President—and I believe odder things have happened—it would put Ellery Seymour in a neat spot as Number One braintruster. But Dorothy could never imagine Susan Kent taking her own place as Ellery's hostess and Washington mentor. She couldn't be jealous on those grounds. I couldn't see her taking Theodore's efforts that seriously in the first place, any more than I could see her sitting quietly whetting claws and fangs to rend Susan Kent apart for any other reason visible to the naked eye. It didn't make sense. Dorothy Hallet had everything, Susan Kent nothing that was comparable . . . nothing but youth, and, oddly enough, in Washington youth isn't as important as it is in Timbuctoo, or Hollywood. Still, it's what you haven't got you want . . .

I went over to my desk. There was a brochure there that some brokerage firm had sent me, on the faulty assumption that I had or would have, at some indefinitely stated time, a lot of loose money to invest. I pulled it out of the pigeonhole I'd stuck it in, not wanting to dump it in the wastebasket, as it was the most super-elegant slick paper job that had come in my mail since the beginning of the war. It was a sort of Harbinger of a New Return to Normalcy, with a difference. It was called "The Saga of a Great American." The great American was Enoch B. Stubblefield, and the Saga was the story of Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises. Up to the middle of the brochure, that is. The last half was called "Vision for the Future," and that was where the catch was. If you sat tight and held on to your money and were very good, while Mr. Stubblefield and his various Assistant Executives were getting ready the dawning of a new world, you would be privileged to come in on one of the better of the lower floors for a quick ride upward to prosperity. As I turned the pages, as far as I could see there was nothing that Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises weren't going to make better and cheaper . . . and always, of course, higher wages, hospitals and swimming pools for the workers and much higher dividends for the investors. It wasn't an invitation to buy. It was merely a statement of what sat just around this new corner for the wise, patient and shrewd.

As I am none of the three, I turned back to the beginning and looked at the camera portrait of Mr. Stubblefield. It was a repro-

duction of the full-face pose you've seen a thousand times in newspapers and magazines the last ten years, except that his thick gray hair had been freshly cut, which gave the face more room for the vast confidence and paternal geniality that sat upon it. It was really impressive. If Mr. Stubblefield had been small and wizened, he might never have got past being the owner-manager of the run-down bakery in Omaha that was pictured on Page Four. As it was, all anybody had to do was look at him to see that here was a man of power, to whom the Vision of the Future was simply a matter of pressing a button under the right-hand corner of his desk.

Underneath the picture, and sufficiently underneath to show that Mr. Stubblefield had nothing to do with the writing of it, was a quotation from Milton Minor's "New Industrialists for Old." "It is not fanciful," I read, "to say that here we have the Atomic Principle personalized and directed with humanitarian force to produce for us, in our time, the Golden Age of Western Industrial Civilization."

On the page facing him, with a piece of tissue inserted, possibly to protect Ellery B. Seymour from the radioactivity of the Atomic Principle, was a picture of the Chief Assistant Executive of Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises. Again there was a quotation from Milton Minor.

"In recognition of the profound debt Industry owes the Technician, and as an indication of the high level of personal loyalty upon which he operates, Enoch B. Stubblefield early made Ellery B. Seymour, inventor of the original process for Stubblefield Plastics, his Number One aide. E. B. S. the Scientist-Dreamer, E. B. S. the Organizing Genius and Man of Action . . . the fact that these two men have the same initials is symbolic of their essential unitv. It was the origin of the *colophon* that is the trade-mark of Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises, the head of Janus, the Roman god who looked two ways at once—into the Past to preserve the best of our Old Way of Life . . . into the Future to create new opportunities and new things for a better, more abundant New Way of Life."

So said Milton Minor, author of "New Industrialists for Old."

It seemed to me, looking at the picture of the Scientist-Dreamer, that Mr. Seymour had a slightly sardonic twinkle in his eye. Perhaps it was only an attempt to look as genial for the camera as the other E. B. S. At forty-five Ellery Sevmour looked younger in the photograph, thin-faced, typically New England. As I knew him he

was an intelligent, pleasant man, a solid citizen of the earth. He couldn't have helped thinking Milton Minor's high-flown prose a little funny, though I'd never heard him say so, and of course I'd never heard him indicate in any way that there might even be something slightly absurd about the Genius Organizer and Man of Action. That look on his face in the photograph could be Ellery Seymour forbearing to kid his own show, I supposed. Or, of course, it could be that a couple of millions, which is what Stubblefield is supposed to have made for him, is as good a blinder as is known to man.

Or again, I thought, it could be that from where he sat he saw Enoch B. Stubblefield and his achievements in a world of reality, not his press in a world of fantasy. I suppose they really are equally fabulous.

It was curious, however, and quite apart from either Stubblefield or Seymour. It was curious about Milton Minor. I'd known him for some time. Until he accidentally wrote a best-seller, he'd been an upright and comparatively sober member of the working press. Having a lot of money suddenly when nobody else did, he bought a big house in Georgetown, and found out, like better men before and since, that the lightning of inspiration seldom strikes twice on the same typewriter. As he was known to have been renting the house for \$750 a month for the last years, it seemed strange to some for him to turn out the kind of panegyric that is "New Industrialists for Old." I knew, however, that he'd bought an expensive wife when he bought the expensive house, and an expensive divorce later with the house thrown in. But it was hard to excuse his turning in an honest pen for the gold-plush nib he must use to write his present gaudy nonsense with. He'd used a bottle of vitriol in the old days. Now, from the sound of it, it was a vat of soft and rosy-tinted soap. I didn't wonder that he seldom came to Washington any more.

I put the book back in its pigeonhole and had started to pay some bills, when the phone rang at my elbow. I picked it up and said "Hello." It was a woman who answered.

"Is Mrs. Theodore Hallet there?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "She's gone."

"Is this Mrs. Latham?"

I said "Yes." It was a pleasant, well-modulated voice, so pleasant

and well-modulated that I had a funny sense of theatre, as if it were part of a play and the curtain must be going up in front of either one or the other of us for the usual opening scene of a polite comedy of manners.

"This is Mrs. Lawrence Taylor," the voice went on. "Mr. Stubblefield's secretary told me I could get Mrs. Hallet at your house. I just wanted to check up on this afternoon—to find out if I was really invited. I hate to appear places without having ever seen or spoken to my hostess."

Her laugh was a warm and throaty sound that made the footlights practically at my feet.

"Perhaps you can help me out," she said. "I called her house, but Mr. Stubblefield's secretary said she was at yours."

"She was here, but she's left," I said. "I do know she said a Mrs. Lawrence Taylor was coming. She got the call from Mr. Stubblefield's office while she was here."

"Oh, well, then. Thank you so much. I'm rather shy about barging in places where I don't know people. I'm a stranger in Washington. Thank you, Mrs. Latham. Good-by."

I said good-by and put the phone down. Mrs. Lawrence Taylor needn't have told me she was a stranger in Washington. She must be a stranger to the whole modern world to be so punctilious as all that. I even found myself looking forward to meeting a woman who belonged to a school I thought was buried at noon the day the cocktail party was born at five.

4

I was lunching out Sixteenth Street. As I went up the steps I was still a little dizzy from the events of the morning. It didn't seem possible that anybody to whom Enoch B. Stubblefield had meant nothing at nine o'clock in the morning could find herself at half-past one in the vortex of one of the whirlpools of confusion and panic that seemed to swirl around him. And I knew I hadn't heard the last of him, because, as I'd told Dorothy Hallet, Freddie Mollinson was going to be at lunch. It was merely a matter of timing that was in question . . . whether it would be with the sherry before lunch, or with the jellied madrilene, or the soft crabs and watercress salad, or the Strawberries Tzarina, that Freddie would pull the

Stubblefield thorn from his still bleeding side. It was a sharp thorn, still festering. As Freddie has little to think about but protocol, ancestry and the wretched plight of the beleaguered minority that lives off inherited capital, any slight, real or imagined, assumes large proportions. And I have no doubt Dorothy Hallet was quite rude the day he phoned her and said, "Darling, you may bring this fellow Stubblefield and his—or is it your?—performing seal for dinner to-night. Or do they still need more time to rent a black tie?"

I wasn't aware that I was late, nor did I have any premonition of what I was walking into when I gave the maid my umbrella and went unhurriedly into the living room. Of all the extraordinary and incredible scenes I've ever thought I'd never see in my restricted universe, the one going on there was the least imaginable. I'd never seen the dark-haired sunburned man there who'd apparently just finished saying something that had everybody in a state of near shock. Only Freddie Mollinson seemed to have drawn himself together sufficiently to reply.

"—don't have any funds invested in rubber plantations," he was saying coldly. "Well, my dear sir, I have a considerable part of my capital invested in rubber. I had special opportunities I took advantage of when I was in the Foreign Service in the Dutch East Indies. If this fellow Stubblefield goes into the synthetic market and drives down the price of natural rubber, what's going to happen to people like myself, who've already suffered severely during the Jap occupation and are just beginning to hope for the market to return? May I ask you that, sir?"

The dark sunburned man grinned.

"Sure. What happened to whale oil, and coal-oil lamps? My job's chemical engineering, Mollinson, and you can't expect me to cry about your bank balance when some guy's smart enough to make a cheaper and better synthetic. It's guys like you that almost made us lose the war. You all said Germany didn't have rubber. You forgot Germany had a thundering synthetic program under way. We coulda lost the war easy, Mr. Mollinson—read the Baruch Report. I'll bet you kicked like hell about rationed gasoline. Well, it wasn't the gas we were trying to save, it was the rubber in your tires. If Stubblefield—and that means Ellery Sevmour—thinks he's got something in synthetics, I'm all for him. It's sure to come. Sooner or later."

He grinned at Freddie again.

"I wouldn't want to be rude, Mollinson," he said. "But if you had to go to work, I can't say it would matter a damn to me. I'm like Ellery Seymour. I'm not a gentleman. I'm just a guy that has to toil for a living, me and a hundred million other dopes who'd like the best tires cheapest. And you talk about Ellery Seymour and this Mrs. Hallet, whoever she is, but you don't know what you're talking about. I know Seymour, knew him at M. I. T., and I knew his wife. They were married his junior year. He quit because they were having a baby and he had to get out and work. He did all right and even did some stuff on his own, and then the slump hit him. He had rougher going than anybody else I know."

He hesitated, looking around at us.

"And I think I'll tell you some more, since you've been panning him so much. His wife turned on the gas and took the little girl with her. There was another on the way. She knew Ellery was tops, and got the idea that without them he'd get somewhere in spite of the slump. I happen to know—I ran into him that night and went out to the hole they were living in. We found them. That's one reason I don't admire to stand here listening to you people giving him the razz. I'm glad to see him in the chips, myself.—So, if you don't mind, let's sign off Seymour, and this Mrs. Hallet, and the Kents, whoever they are, and let's leave Mr. Stubblefield out of it too. Surely there's enough in the world to talk about without dragging them in."

That was what he thought, of course. The result was a conversational Yukon before the ice breaks in the spring. And it ruined Freddie's thorn. He didn't have a chance to tell how he'd invited Dorothy to bring Mr. Stubblefield and Mr. Seymour to dinner, since Mrs. Stubblefield was not in town, and how Dorothy had said thanks but she'd rather take them to a saloon on Wisconsin Avenue, if he didn't mind. I was sorry, in a way, because I always love to hear his grand finale.

"—I didn't in the least mind, I may say. I was delighted, in fact, except that I'd invited several friends in who were curious to see this . . . this elephantine figment of the popular imagination."

The Hallets' house is the one up Massachusetts Avenue perched on all that's left of the triangle between the Bridge and the road

going down into Rock Creek Park on the right. It extends back along the road, and behind there's a long wooded terrace, landscaped like the hanging gardens of Babylon, sloping steeply down into the Park, which accounts for the stray rosebushes and petunias any motorist can pick up down there after a whacking good rain.

There was just a warm woolly drizzle at seven-fifteen when I left my car below Waterside Drive and went the rest of the way on foot. I didn't, at first, see the woman in black who was standing at the end of the path leading to the attractively redecorated stables occupied by Susan and Bill Kent at an overall of three hundred a month, with Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises paying two hundred of it. When I did see her, I was so startled I didn't miss the mud puddle just ahead of me. She was like something out of a Scandinavian fairy tale—a forlorn tragic figure with a black scarf over her head and sad, unhappy eyes. She just stood there in the rain, looking back at me. As I started to speak to her, Haste, the Halletts' chauffeur who was pinch-hitting as doorman, came out under the green-and-white awning.

"I can't get her go away, Mis' Latham," he said. "She keep hangin' round, say she invited."

The woman gave me a wan smile.

"I am invited," she said quietly. "I'm Bertha Taylor, Mrs. Latham. Mrs. Lawrence Taylor."

Haste took his list out of his pocket. He was a little nervous, with much to be said on his side. If I hadn't recognized her voice, I think I would have agreed with him. As it was, I held out my umbrella for her to get under.

"It's all right, Haste," I said.

"Oh, thank you!" Mrs. Taylor went up the steps with me. "You're very kind."

In the brighter light of the powder room I must say I was more than doubtful. Her rain-spotted black rayon dress had shrunk in wattles. Her face, without benefit of makeup, looked as if she'd been sick a long time, her dry gray hair was straggling down the back of her neck and she made no effort to do anything about it—in fact, she didn't even glance in the mirror. She stood by the door waiting with her scarf folded in her hands, patiently, and with a curious air—not frightened, I thought, but certainly with something almost like desperation. I began to be worried. After all, I didn't even know she

really was Mrs. Lawrence Taylor, and perhaps Haste's judgment was better than mine.

From the drawing room upstairs I could hear the gay party cacophony.

"If you're ready, shall we go up?" I said.

Her soggy shoes made a queer squashing sound on the marble staircase. She moved slowly. I had to wait on every other step.

"I haven't been very well," she said. "I hope Mrs. Hallet won't mind my coming . . ."

Fortunately Mrs. Hallet was at the drawing-room door, and fortunately Mrs. Hallet is a woman of great social presence.

"This is Mrs. Lawrence Taylor . . . Mrs. Hallet," I said. "I'm afraid we're both slightly damp."

Dorothy smiled and put out her hand. "How do you do, Mrs. Taylor? I think you know Mrs. Stubblefield, don't you, and Mr. Stubblefield?"

If it had been the Queen of Sheba on her golden litter, Dorothy couldn't have been more gracious as she turned to the small, pallid and astonishingly over-dressed woman standing beside her. I don't remember having ever seen a picture of Mrs. Stubblefield, but I'd never have thought of her, from hearing Dorothy, as any one so completely colorless. But I'd seen many pictures of the great American standing next to her, and I was disappointed in him too. Mr. Stubblefield was certainly big, but he didn't tower over everybody. The Southern senator talking to him was just as big and the blond young man behind him was bigger. But he had something they didn't have. Whether it really was indomitable power, or whether it was just superbly bland self-assurance, I didn't know. As he turned and I saw the full-face pose, he was older than the pictures, his face more lined, not as ebulliently healthy as the camera showed. And the paternal geniality, while it was there, wasn't entirely as convincing as the camera and the press always made it.

I say it was there. What I mean is that it was there, as he turned toward us, for the fraction of an instant that it would take a cat to blink its eyes . . . or precisely as long as it took Enoch B. Stubblefield to adjust to the pathetically shoddy figure of the woman with him. His face was just meaningless lines then, the geniality instantaneously wiped out as if somebody had gone over it with a caustic soap and invisible dishrag. It was genuinely frightening. Mrs. Stub-

blefield seemed to shrink until she was nothing more than a thin quivering line against her own backbone, and she was no longer pallid—she was plain flat gray. Not Mr. Stubblefield. His face was an angry red, the meaningless lines changing to as cold a malignity as I've ever seen.

I stood there paralyzed for a moment. He didn't like Mrs. Lawrence Taylor. I gathered that immediately. Perhaps, having brought her in, I should have stayed and backed her up, some way; but I dare say I'm fairly white-livered. I got out. I quietly retired backwards as far as I could, and then I turned and ducked. And just in time. I heard Mr. Stubblefield say harshly:

"—Who brought this woman here, Mrs. Hallet?"

I stopped where I was. I didn't like the sound of that voice. And where I was by the great fireplace between the open windows to the balcony, which would have been all right except that Ellery B. Seymour was there too. He may even have been the magnet that drew me there; he had some of that quality the way he was standing, rigid, his eyes fixed across the room.

He turned slowly to me. "You brought her here, Mrs. Latham?"

"Yes," I said. "I did bring her. I found her outside in the rain, and I knew she'd been invited. Mr. Stubblefield's secretary called Dorothy at my house this morning. She told her that a Mrs. Lawrence Taylor was to come. This . . . is Mrs. Taylor?"

"*She!*" he said curtly. "Mr. Stubblefield's secretary is a he, not a she."

He bit the words off as if any fool in the country ought to know that. I was a little taken aback. It wasn't the way I expected any Dreamer-Scientist to act, especially Ellery Seymour, who was normally so polished you could practically see yourself reflected in him. He seemed not to like Mrs. Taylor either, which made it three out of three for the Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises present. He was upset and angry, though I thought his anger seemed to have a different quality, somehow, from Mr. Stubblefield's.

He put his cocktail abruptly down on the fireplace mantel and headed abruptly for the drawing-room door. There was still a general hubbub there. He pushed his way into the middle. I couldn't see any of the principals. It was, however, none of my business. There was a shaker of cocktails on the console table by the fireplace, and I picked it up and poured myself one.

As I did, a hand came in alongside me, holding an empty glass. I filled it and looked around.

"As I live and breathe," I said. "Don't tell me. Let me guess. It *can't* be . . . or is it?"

5

Milton Minor, author of "New Industrialists for Old," lifted his left eyebrow, drained his glass and held it back for another. He was fatter and sleeker, his hair line a little farther back, and he was puffish under the eyes. Otherwise, except also for a new black mustache, he hadn't changed much.

"It is the gifted biographer in person," he said. He looked quickly back at the group by the drawing-room door. "And let's get the hell out of here, Grace. You don't know. *She's* supposed to be buried somewhere in Montana."

We'd taken a few steps when he stopped, returned hastily and picked up the cocktail shaker, and came back.

"It's nice to see you, lady."

Things being as they were, it was nice to see him too, and it was certainly nice to get out, if I could, before Mr. Stubblefield decided to call me to account personally. We went through the long windows that open out onto the balcony over the terrace, and sat down on the rail. Through the windows on the other side of the fireplace I could see the drawing room clearing out, suddenly. I'd never been at a night club when it was raided, but I could imagine then what it was like. And Theodore Hallet could easily have been the resident manager, the way he was going around in small circles, everywhere at once, trying, I supposed, to rescue his Presidential white hope . . . except that, in spite of his essential charm, which tots up to an imposing sum even after taxes are paid, Theodore Hallet is a small, ineffectual man with graying reddish hair and a face like a worried dormouse, and hence hardly, I suppose, very much like any night-club impresario.

And I was glad I hadn't taken Dorothy's bet, because Freddie Mollinson was there. He was sitting calmly over to one side, sipping his cocktail, ignoring the whole thing in a very well-bred way. And Susan Kent was there too, in a filmy sea-green evening gown,

standing in the middle of the room with her back to us, and to all appearances, it seemed to me, remarkably at ease in view of everything. The woman in black was nowhere in sight.

"Where did you pick her up, Grace?" Milton Minor asked.

"I didn't," I said. "I ran into her outside, and brought her in because Haste was being such a snob. She was supposed to have been invited. Who is she, and what's wrong with her?"

Before he could answer, a tall gangly young man came out the other windows, and seeing us came along the balcony. It was Bill Kent. I didn't recognize him at first. I was only conscious of somebody with a thick shock of dark hair and a pleasantly casual loose-jointed walk approaching us out of the shadows.

"Hello," he said. "Mrs. Latham, isn't it? I'm Bill Kent. What the hell goes on? Who's the dame in the melancholy get-up? She came in with—"

"Oh, hello," I said. He was grinning, a nice friendly grin that gave me a sharp twinge of something—I don't know what to call it. He was so entirely unconscious of carrying any aura of storm. He didn't know there was going to be one. But I hadn't expected Susan Kent to take my advice. I'd have been more surprised if she had—and of course in that case neither of them would have been here. So I smiled up at him.

"She came with me," I said, talking about the lady in black. "I haven't any idea who she is, except—"

Milton gave me a sharp nudge with his elbow. I gathered she was something we weren't supposed to talk about, so I said, "Do you know Milton Minor? He writes heliotrope portraits of great men who aren't dead yet. Maybe he'll give you a cocktail if you've got a glass. This is Bill Kent, Milton. He's with Rubber Reserve."

They shook hands.

"No more for me," Bill said. "And I'm with Rubber Reserve now, but I'm getting out next week. I'm heading back to the sticks. I've had all the Great World I can take. I'm a country boy."

"You teach, don't you," I said, for Milton.

"Chemical engineering. Ottawan. It's just a cow college in Nebraska, but boy, will I be glad to get back to it."

I smiled at Milton.

"Okay, okay," he said. "I know. I'm sunk to my ears in the flesh-pots. So what? If a guy wants to pay me to eat caviare, why not?"

"If you're going to be so touchy, let's talk about something else," I said. "Who is that girl in green in there? Her back's pretty."

He grinned. "That's my wife. Her face is even prettier. You've met her, Mrs. Latham."

"Oh, of course," I said.

I wasn't very happy about the subterfuge, but I'd found out what I wanted to know. He was obviously in love with her, and very proud of her. It was in his voice and the way he sat with us looking in at her alone by the table. And there was something else that distressed me now. It was the dress she had on. I recognized that too. It was a Copran Frères that I'd seen in a shop on Connecticut Avenue when I was in one day with a friend who was buying an evening dress for her daughter. She didn't buy that one. It cost two hundred and twenty-five dollars.

"Pretty dress she's got on," Milton said.

"I'll say." Bill Kent grinned again. His pride was both pleasant and a little sheepish this time. "It ought to be—it set us back seventy-five bucks this month. But I suppose you don't think that's much money."

"I do," I said. "Doctor Minor probably doesn't."

I was thinking "Oh, dear!" as I looked at the dress again. I wasn't mistaken. It was really a lovely thing, very simple, and something any woman would recognize, seeing it again. Somehow, in spite of the rent and in spite of what she'd said about his trusting her in everything and his being unworldly, I wasn't quite prepared for this.

"Susan doesn't want to go back," Bill said. He'd skipped the dress. "I don't blame her. She's had a swell time. Dorothy Hallet's been a peach. I guess it's grim for a gal to have to leave all this high-class plush. But what do you do?"

Milton Minor looked at him. "Get another job somewhere else. You could make a hell of a lot of money in industrial chemistry. There's a demand for you guys, these days."

"Sure, I know. You sound like Susan. I'm a research guy. I've got a good set-up at Ottawan."

"You'd have a better one in a first-rate plant. You've seen some of their laboratories, haven't you?"

Bill Kent nodded. "I've seen a lot of them, and they're honeys. But I've got a different kind of freedom, out at Ottawan. They've been swell to me. I said I'd come back, for a couple of years, till we

finish the job we're doing there. Then I can have a look around. But I'll still be in the teaching end. There are plenty of places I can go if I'm as good as I think I am."

He grinned to keep it from sounding as it might have sounded if it had been Milton Minor, for example, saying it about himself.

"No, it's just Susan I'm thinking about. I feel sorry for the kid."

Milton tossed his cigarette abruptly over the balcony rail.

"Take her back with you, brother. Don't let her get you down. Do what you want to do, even if you starve."

He spoke with so much vehemence that Bill Kent smiled.

"That's what I'm going to do, pal, only I don't plan to starve." He got down off the rail. "In fact, I'm doing it right now. If anybody misses me, tell 'em I had to finish some work tonight, will you? So long, friends."

We watched him go along the balcony.

"Nice guy," Milton Minor said. "Smart. I just hope he stays smart. —Or is he?"

He looked at me.

"If baby got that little number for seventy-five bucks, somebody used to get a hell of a kick-back out of the bills I paid. But, what the hell."

He poured himself another drink.

"And you can just lay off me, Grace—lay off and shut up. Cripes, don't you know I get fed to the teeth with all this stinking hogwash I put out? You know, you'd think the big baboon would gag on it . . . but every time I get a belly laugh thinking, 'Baby, *this* tears it'; he *loves* it. He eats it up. He blinks and says, 'Hey, this is *me*!' And up goes my check a thousand smackeros. But oh God, Grace, sometimes I sit there thinking, 'You son of a so-and-so, you self-righteous stinker!' Some day I'm going to haul off with a blunt instrument, by *God* I am. And I'm not being funny."

He got up abruptly. "First, I'm going and get myself a decent drink. I hate all this junk. Want one?"

"No, thanks," I said.

"You stay here. I'll be back. I'm not through yet."

I watched him go into the drawing room and across toward the bar at the front of the house. He was weaving a little, which wasn't surprising. The shaker of Manhattans on the porch table was solid empty. As he passed Susan Kent he stopped and looked her up and

down, which I doubt he'd have been rude enough to do if he'd been reasonably sober. He turned back to me and shook his head derisively before he went on. Susan turned too, a little surprised at first. When she saw me the surprise flamed in her cheeks to a startled brilliant red, and she went quickly across the room out of sight.

I turned around. It was all too bad. No matter how unworldly she thought her husband was—and he seemed to me on the contrary to have his feet set on pretty firm ground—she couldn't hope to get away with fooling him forever. It wasn't any unworldliness, it was his faith in her that was blinding him now. But he wouldn't be totally blind. It wasn't too long a step from recognizing her infatuation with Washington glamour to a further recognition when he'd finally put his foot down and say, "We're leaving, baby." He was a tough-minded young man. It was odd it should have taken her so long to realize it.

On the other hand, nobody could blame her for wanting to stay where the excitement was, or for not wanting to go back to Ottawan and do her own dishes on a college teacher's pay when she saw the golden hills just over the horizon. It didn't excuse her, but I did feel sorry for her. The two hundred and twenty-five dollar Copran Frères must be a poor exchange for her peace of mind. She couldn't help being almost frantic right now.

The lights on the Bridge made a brilliant belt, diffusing a soft misty glow above the trees in the Park. The Cathedral stood out dark and impressive against the sky glow up on Wisconsin Avenue. I'm not sure whether it was a sound I heard or a movement I saw, but I was suddenly aware that there was some one down in the garden below me. It was a stealthy movement. I was just beginning to make out the figure standing with arms raised on the first ledge of the terrace below the level of the house, when some one turned on the outside light in the stable yard where the Kents live. I could see very plainly then.

It was my friend in black. She was binding the scarf she'd worn over her head around it, making a turban of it instead of the peasant's shawl arrangement it had been when I met her. She tucked the ends in quickly and opened her bag. I saw the glint of a mirror as she drew a lipstick across her mouth. She closed the bag, and then she lit out, with astonishing speed, down the zigzag path. I

lost her then, but only for a moment. A car door slammed, headlights came on, a motor started up, the car roared down the road. Mrs. Lawrence Taylor, who was a stranger in Washington and who had hardly been able to make the marble staircase because she hadn't been very well, had made as neat and rapid a get-away as I will ever hope to witness.

"Stranger, my eye," I said.

"What did you say?"

I turned quickly. I thought it was going to be the gutted biographer coming back, but it wasn't. It was Ellery Seymour. He was lowering his hand with a big white handkerchief in it, having obviously come out on the porch in the vulgar act of mopping the sweat off his brow, though it wasn't any hotter than it had been all day.

I pointed down the terrace. "I saw the——"

I stopped short. There was an anguished cry from inside the drawing room that choked off quickly in a strangled sob. "*—Enoch!*"

"Oh, my God!" Seymour exclaimed.

I was appalled to hear myself give a sort of hysterical laugh. After the fantastic business of the woman in black, to hear him say "Oh, my God!" that way made everything seem completely cock-eyed. It was exactly as if he'd said, "What is it now—is everybody going crazy?" And he just stood there. I don't suppose it was more than a fraction of a moment, but it was long enough to make him seem like a blind man, confused and bewildered. Then he dashed for the window, and I followed him.

I'm sure we both expected to see Mr. Stubblefield stretched out dead as a dodo on the drawing-room floor. But he wasn't; he was standing there very much alive. I suppose that's why neither of us saw for a moment what had really happened. Then I heard Ellery Seymour draw his breath in sharply. That's when I saw her. It was Susan Kent, standing in the library doorway, her face ghastly white. By her, and with his right hand holding hers motionless, was the blond young man I'd seen behind Mr. Stubblefield the moment before I deserted the woman in black.

The horrible thing was what Susan Kent had in her hand—a small automatic revolver, iridescent blue and purple and in savage contrast to her dead-white fingers clutching it.

The blond young man took it easily out of her hand.

"She was right here behind the door, Chief. It was aimed right at your back."

He spoke coolly, with an odd mixture of determination and embarrassment. "I don't want to make any trouble, sir. This was the business."

Susan Kent straightened up, her face still very white.

"No—it's not true! I wasn't going to . . . I just had it in my hand. I found it, on the floor—I just picked it up!"

She looked desperately around at us. "—Dorothy! Make them believe me . . . you've got to believe me! Oh, where's Bill! Where's my husband!"

She leaned against the door frame, sobbing.

I went unobtrusively over and sat down on a sofa. My knees weren't very steady. In fact, they were appallingly unsteady. The whole thing was so shockingly unbelievable. She couldn't possibly have been such a fool, so frantic, as to try that way to get out of the jam she was in. It couldn't make sense.

I don't know how Milton Minor got there. I didn't see him come around the room. I was only aware of his sitting down beside me. He had a highball glass in his hand. As he put it down on the floor a little slopped over the side. He took his handkerchief out and wiped off his hand.

He leaned over toward me and spoke under his breath, hardly moving his lips.

"The boy's dead right. I saw her. Across the hall from the bar. She picked it up all right, but it was in the middle of the floor. Where'd Bill go? I think we'd better get hold of him—quick."

6

It's hard to describe the breaking up of a general paralysis of the sort, especially when most of my own mind was still in the grip of it. Cynic and time-server as he might be, Milton Minor wasn't a liar.

He wouldn't have said he saw Susan Kent pick up the gun, and aim it, unless he'd seen her do it. Standing at the bar there, he could have seen her very simply. The convincing evidence to me, however, was the shock that had obliterated all previous effects of the shaker of Manhattans. And he wasn't drinking now.

He reached down and put his highball farther under the sofa where nobody would kick it over. Then he sat quietly watching. When I started to get up he took hold of my skirt and drew me back.

"Let's keep out of this, Grace. You couldn't do anything."

I guess he was right. Dorothy Hallet and Theodore had gone over to Susan, and Dorothy took her to the sofa by the fireplace and made her sit down. Dorothy seemed outwardly as calm as ever, but I thought it was taking considerable effort. She's usually extremely articulate, and so far she'd hardly said a word.

In fact the only person who'd said much was Mrs. Enoch B. Stubblefield, and she was babbling hysterically . . . something about a Madame Tigane, and a dark-haired woman under an acceleration of evil. It came as a distinct shock to see how firmly she believed, apparently, in her professional seeress, whose potential correctness seemed to take precedence just then over the fact that her husband was alive and whole. And I must say that her husband was taking it with an iron calm. He wasn't looking very genial, but he wasn't mopping his forehead, the way his Chief Assistant Executive Ellery B. Seymour was doing, nor was he as nervous as his young man in the doorway was.

"—I'm just telling you what I saw, Chief."

"That's all right, Kramer," Mr. Stubblefield said. "You've done your job. Just relax and go get yourself a drink. We'll handle this ourselves."

"—Ex-Marine, Pacific," Milton Minor said, under his breath. "Tough baby—E. B.'s bodyguard."

"Why didn't he do something about the lady in black?" I asked.

"He was checking on her when he spotted our Susie. I wish she'd buck up and not look so damned guilty. Take a gander at Seymour, will you?"

He got up abruptly then and headed back to the bar. Kramer had followed his chief's orders and was disappearing that way. I took the gander at Ellery Seymour. He was pacing up and down in front of the fireplace. He seemed shockingly upset. I suppose, with reason—from the little I knew, and he knew a great deal more, he must have wondered why it was the Number One man of the new industrial age, and not himself, Number Two, that she'd apparently decided to obliterate. It ought to be extremely un-

nerving. I didn't blame him in the least. Mr. Stubblefield apparently did, for he shouted at him suddenly.

"Get off your feet, Seymour! Sit down, will you? Nobody's trying to shoot you."

Seymour sat, abruptly. It was at the nearest place, a sofa like the one Barbara and Dorothy were on, across the fireplace. As he sat down, Freddie Mollinson sitting there moved over, dissociating himself, I supposed, as far as possible. Freddie's eyes were bulging bright. He reminded me of a twitching squirrel avidly gathering acorns for his winter's fare. Freddie was already dining out on the story of the year. He was also having a perfect field day of revenge. "She should have taken them to a saloon on Wisconsin Avenue—at least nobody would have tried to murder him . . ." I could hear it already.

"—Why were you trying to shoot my husband?" Mrs. Stubblefield leaned forward. Why I'd thought she was colorless I couldn't imagine. She was an extremely determined little woman.

"Oh, I wasn't—I really wasn't!"

Susan Kent was still trembling. She was as gray-green as her dress, and circles were coming out under her eyes. "I want Bill—can't somebody find him for me?"

Theodore Hallet had just come out of the library and was moving aimlessly around. "He's not at home," he said. "I'll go call his office." He started back, apparently glad to have something to do.

Dorothy glanced at him. "Call the laboratory, Theodore."

"There's no reason to disturb him," Mr. Stubblefield said. He was, I thought, rather suddenly as bland as sweet butter. He went over and sat down beside Susan, took her hand and patted it.

"Come now, little lady," he said kindly. He was smiling, and geniality itself . . . the Platonic Form of all the thousand particulars ever printed of him. "If I believed Joe Kramer, I'd have an armored car to go to the bathroom in. You're a high-class young lady, and I'm going to take your word for it. I'm a good judge of people. I've never been wrong yet. I've built up a fair-sized little business on that very factor, and nobody's ever fooled me to date."

It seemed to me that Mr. Stubblefield ought to be tapping on wood, tapping like mad. It had the effect of stiffening Susan's backbone a little. She let go Dorothy's hand and sat there, her eyes down.

"It wouldn't have surprised me if Bertha Taylor had done it," Mr. Stubblefield said. "You get used to having kindness repaid in counterfeit coin, but we may have to do something about her, if she's going around with a gun in her pocket. But that's another matter. Right now we're going to forget about all this. Dorothy'll give us a drink and something to eat, and we'll all feel better. So come along. One of the ladies will take you up and wash your face and everything'll be as right as rain."

He patted her shoulder and got up. "If you'll excuse me, I'd like to have a word with Mr. Seymour. Can we have the library, Dorothy?"

"Certainly."

He was already on his way, Seymour following. They closed the door.

Dorothy turned to me. "Will you go up with Susan, Grace? I've got to see what's happening in the kitchen."

She started for the door.

"Won't the rest of you just relax and have a drink, or something? Freddie, you might show Mrs. Stubblefield the view from the balcony. Hurry, Susan, will you, dear?"

Susan got up unsteadily and moved in a dazed fog across to the hall door. I must have been the last person in the world she wanted to be alone with just then, but I couldn't very well refuse to go with her—or she with me. She went up the stairs slowly, holding on to the banisters. Inside Dorothy's room she walked over to the chaise longue more like an automaton than a girl and sat down, staring in front of her. I couldn't think of the least objectionable thing to say to break the silence, and decide to skip it.

"If I were you, I'd go do something about my face and hair," I said. She still looked ghastly. Her hair had escaped the sophisticated upswept arrangement again, and was straggling in curls around her ears and neck.

She got up, still moving like a frail young Lady Macbeth, and went into the bathroom. I powdered my nose, put on some fresh lipstick, and examined the fascinating array of perfume bottles and the battery of cosmetics on Dorothy's dressing table. Being a one-cream soap-and-water man myself, I'm always entranced by the time, energy and art it must take to use all that truck and still look as Dorothy does, like a freshly rain-washed gardenia. Then I began

to have a few twinges of uneasiness. It was intensely quiet behind the mirrored door. When the twinges got disturbingly past the point of my interest in estrogenic night creams, I got up and went over.

"Susan!"

There was no answer. I was a little frightened, not knowing what she might do. I called her again, then opened the door. The bathroom was empty. The connecting door into Dorothy's sitting room was open, and I went quickly through it. She wasn't there either. I hurried back through the bathroom to get my bag and run downstairs, and stopped. She was inside the hall door, standing with it closed, her hand still on the knob.

I was so relieved that I was annoyed. It hardly seemed the time to be playing hide-and-go seek.

She stood there looking at me, her eyes wide open in a set and resentful stare.

"I was going home," she said steadily. "But I changed my mind. I wanted to tell you I know you're not what you pretended to be. Your cook just laughed when I told her. It was all a trap, and I was crazy enough to walk into it. But I'll tell you this, Mrs. Latham—if my husband finds out . . . if either you or Dorothy Hallett tells my husband, I'll—"

"Oh, stop it, Susan," I said. "Stop it at once. I wasn't pretending to be anything and I'm not trying to trap you. And I haven't any intention of telling anybody what you told me. Particularly not your husband. That's your job. And quit being a damned fool. It's stupid to start threatening people. I didn't ask you to my house. You came yourself."

"But I came because I thought—"

"I can't help what you thought. You were hunting an easy out for the mess you're in, and there's only one out. I know it isn't easy, but you'd better take it, quick. Your husband doesn't look to me like half as big a fool as you must think he is. He looks like an honest and decent guy and a pretty bright one. You might try being the same for a while. Now be quiet. Just go and put some lipstick on and fix your hair. You needn't have the least fear of my telling anybody anything."

She stood there breathing quickly, trembling a little, her resentment collapsing long before I'd finished. But she didn't move from

the door. When she spoke her voice had a totally different quality.

"Mrs. Latham."

"Yes," I said.

"Mrs. Latham, do you think I was going to shoot Mr. Stubblefield?"

She was looking at me fairly steadily, but not too much so. I went over to the dressing table and picked up my bag.

"I never think," I said. "I'm not supposed to be good at it."

"Which means you do think so, doesn't it? But you don't really know, do you?"

I thought of a lot of things to say then, but I didn't say them. I said, "Quit being dramatic, will you, Susan? It's all right to be a fool, but don't be theatrical." I was really irritated by now. She was so blatantly young and so obviously trying to put on an air that might let her out of this new mess that I could have taken her by the nape of the neck and shaken her. "I'd like to go downstairs," I said.

She flushed a bright red and moved away from the door.

"I'm . . . I didn't mean to be dramatic," she said uncertainly. "I'm . . . what I'm trying to say is that . . . maybe you're right. I don't really know."

That was too much.

"Look, dear," I said, patiently. "If you're going to tell me you picked up a gun and aimed it from behind a door that has a wide hinge-crack in it, without knowing what you were doing, tell it to somebody else, will you? And first make very sure there isn't another door open, and somebody wasn't calmly watching you from across the hall."

She gave a small but audible gasp. "Somebody watching—"

I started for the door. "That's what I said, Susan. You're in a bad spot all around, and you're putting everybody—Dorothy and Theodore, to say nothing of your husband—in one. I'd start using my head if I were you. Mr. Stubblefield has taken your word for it, and you'd better let it go at that and act as if it's true whether it is or not. That's just one woman's opinion, darling, but it seems to me fairly sound at the moment. Now if you'll get ready, we'll go down. The longer we stay up here the worse it looks. I'd hurry if I were you."

She went quickly into the bathroom, leaving the door open this time.

"That's better," I said when she came out. "Now buck up and come along."

I opened the door. She followed me out, as meek as a frightened kitten. I still had no faintest idea in the world of what she could have thought she was doing, or hoped to gain, by taking a pot shot at Enoch B. Stubblefield

7

Downstairs things were as smooth as owl's grease. Even Freddie Mollinson's nose had descended to a comparatively normal level, and he was chatting very amiably with Mrs. Stubblefield. The only thing I could figure was that she'd produced an ancestor

that made her a potential Colonial Dame, or that Freddie was scavenging for some titilating table talk, or a tip on the market.

Mr. Stubblefield and Ellery Seymour were discussing the labor situation with Dorothy and Theodore, that being the specter with hairy claws that lives under Theodore's bed and behind every door he opens. He was getting Mr. Stubblefield's assurance that matters were under control.

"I have never had any labor trouble, in any plant I own," Mr. Stubblefield was saying.

". . . Unquote," said Milton Minor. He was waiting inside the door for us to come down.

"My solution has always been—"

Mr. Stubblefield stopped as Dorothy, completely self-possessed again, held out her hand to Susan, smiling, motioning for her to come and join them. He turned, leaving the labor situation where I believe it still is, in mid-air.

"Come along, Susan," he said. He held out his large hand, pulled her to him and stood with his arm around her shoulders—very paternal, though Mrs. Stubblefield seemed to have some doubts if the brief glance she gave them meant what it looked like. Milton and I found a seat on the other side of the room.

"I tried to check up," he said, lowering his voice. "I wanted to see if the saloon keeper in there saw her too. I had my back

turned to the bar. And I don't think he did—he was washing glasses. As for me”—he lifted a sardonic left eyebrow—“my lips are sealed. I only regret the little lady's nerve failed before the crucial test. But that's life. I've seen it happen a thousand times—in another department, of course.”

“Let's keep it clean, darling,” I said. “And I don't see—”

At that moment Dorothy stepped out from her small group.

“Shall we go in and have some food?”

She smiled over at Mrs. Stubblefield.

“It's very informal. I sidetracked the other guests. I thought it was better to keep it just family.”

She smiled again and turned back to Mr. Stubblefield. “There's just one thing, E. B. I know it's silly, but I'd be a lot more comfortable if Mr. Kramer put that gun somewhere—up here on the mantel—where we can all see it. I just don't like guns. I'd be much happier if *nobody* was carrying one. Unless you don't feel safe.”

Her smile was the you-know-how-unreasonable-women-are sort of thing, and Mr. Stubblefield responded to it instantly. He was benign.

“Oh certainly, Dorothy. Anything you say.”

Whatever had happened in his brief conference with Ellery Seymour in the library, he was in high good humor, expansive and self-confident.

“Put it up there, my boy.” He looked around at the rest of us, heavily jocular. “Anybody else got a concealed weapon? Come clean, friends.”

Nobody else seemed to have one. Kramer crossed to the fireplace and put the pistol on the mantel, I thought reluctantly. Polite appreciation of the great man's humor was absent on two other faces. Both Ellery Seymour and Mrs. Stubblefield looked distinctly unhappy. Mrs. Stubblefield, however, was the only one who protested.

“I don't think it's safe, Enoch.”

“Now, now, Mutton. I wouldn't say that.”

It was the tone husbands humor the little woman in. And it seems he really called her “Mutton.” Milton Minor glanced at me and nodded solemnly to confirm it.

Mutton still didn't like it. “At least he can unload it, can't he, Enoch?”

"Oh, I hope so." That was Dorothy. "I assumed of course he had."

Apparently he hadn't, because he did then. He tied the shells in a corner of his handkerchief and put them in his dinner jacket pocket.

"That's better," Dorothy said. "Now shall we go in?"

I'm not sure we didn't all take a backward glance at that small lethal object on the mantelpiece, all except Susan Kent. Her face was deeply flushed, and she kept her eyes down as she converged with Ellery Seymour at the dining-room door and waited until the gifted biographer and I went in. I looked back then. Freddie Mollinson had stopped to put his cigarette out on an ashtray apparently too near the fireplace for Mr. Kramer's peace of mind. He didn't come in until Freddie was safely in front of him. Poor Freddie, I thought. It's hard to appear superior when somebody obviously thinks you're trying to swipe a gun. I wouldn't be surprised if that wasn't, in some way, the final straw that made him utterly lose control of himself as he did a few minutes later.

It was a strange meal. The steak must have been a sudden last-minute reversal to placate its donor. I struck a spot in the center of my piece that was still frozen, and the rest of the meal was definitely designed for duck, not meat. I suppose Dorothy figured he'd been through enough without her throwing that in his face. I doubt if she'd normally serve wild rice and sour-sweet red cabbage with baby beef, and the wine was white until Theodore got up and personally brought in three bottles of Moulin au Vent 1929.

"I've got a ranch in Texas," Mr. Stubblefield was saying. "I've killed enough steers the last five years to feed a city the size of Cleveland for eleven days. I sell everything we don't use to my various hospitals. They haven't been without some kind of meat the entire war."

"A deep freeze is a wonderful thing, isn't it?" Mrs. Stubblefield said. "We've got the largest private plant in the country."

Normally, I doubt if it would be thought of as the most felicitous opening for a dinner-table conversation in Washington at the moment, the price of meat, when you could get it, being what it was, but it did launch Mr. Stubblefield on the story of his life.

"Now you take Seymour here," he said at last. He leaned back and looked at his Chief Assistant Executive. "Seymour had an idea.

He brought it to me and I developed it. Whenever he gets out of hand, I just remind him of that day. He looked like a bum off the skid road, a half-starved weasel—pants shiny, shoes falling apart. Any fool can get an idea, but what good is it unless you've got the brains and the get-up-and-get it takes to put the thing across? Right, Seymour?"

It was all said with fine good nature, but it wouldn't have surprised me if Mr. Seymour had got to his feet and hurled the fruit bowl full in his chief's face. But he didn't. He put his wine glass down and laughed.

"Absolutely, E. B.," he said. "I remember what I must have looked like. It's a wonder you ever let me in in the first place."

"That was Mrs. Pottle." Mutton left her beef for the moment and looked around. "Some people don't believe in astrology, but Mrs. Pottle was very good. She used cards too. She told me to tell my husband to look out for a young man, and she didn't have any idea who I was or who my husband was. She said he'd have the same initials as my husband, but she wasn't able to get through to what they were. She got the 'E' but she couldn't get the rest of it. 'E. B. S.' My husband didn't believe me until the next day Ellery B. Seymour came in. That's how it really started. I believe in the stars, myself."

I glanced at Milton Minor, but he was busy eating.

"—Is that how you've decided to buy a rubber plant, Mr. Stubblefield?"

It was Freddie Mollinson who threw the stone that put the stars to flight.

"Rubber plant?" If Mr. Stubblefield was startled he recovered blandly. "I'm afraid I'm not a horticulturist, Mr. Mollinson."

"I mean a synthetic rubber plant," Freddie said angrily. He was more than like a feisty terrier. "I'm told you have a process that's going to make natural rubber as obsolete as whale oil for lamps, and you're buying one of the biggest synthetic plants we have. I would like to suggest that you had better watch what you are doing, Mr. Stubblefield. The people of this country aren't going to stand by and see themselves ruined just for your self-aggrandizement."

We were all, including Mr. Stubblefield, almost staring open-mouthed at him. His voice was shaking and so were his hands. I

think I was the only person who looked at Susan Kent, and I didn't mean to—it was an unconscious reflex I couldn't control. She was as white as the china rim of her plate. Her fork was motionless in her hands. She looked simply scared stiff, and as I watched her she turned slowly to a sick pea-green. Then, with a jerky wooden motion of her hand she put her fork down on the plate. She pushed her chair back and got up. Everybody looked at her this time.

"Excuse me, please—I don't feel well. I'm going home."

Before any of the men could get to their feet she was gone, like a streak of gray-green lightning, out of the drawing room.

Dorothy got up quickly and hurried after her. Mr. Stubblefield made a ponderous move to rise, Kramer coming up with him as if they had a system of radio control, the drone following automatically.

"Sit down, E. B."

Ellery Seymour seemed to forget that he had come off the ski road a half-starved weasel with his shoes coming apart. Both Mr. Stubblefield and his man went back without a word.

"She's had a rocky evening. I think she ought to be let alone for a while."

He turned abruptly back to Freddie Mollinson. "May I ask where you got this astonishing information you seem to have?" he said curtly.

"I'm not at liberty to say, Mr. Seymour. You may assume the source was unimpeachable."

I avoided looking at Milton Minor, though I could see him, in the general periphery, blowing large blue-gray smoke rings that dissolved before they reached the candles at his end of the table. Unless Freddie had been doing some quiet spade work on the side his unimpeachable source was just the man who'd come to lunch and ruined it.

"—But I also think it's fairly obvious, Mr. Seymour," Freddie went on. "There must be some explanation for your well-known interest in Mrs. Kent. I doubt if you'd find her quite so irresistible if her husband weren't employed by the Rubber Reserve. Somebody must be paying the rent for the Halletts' gold-plated stables. She dresses remarkably well for the wife of a . . ."

He didn't stop abruptly. The words just trailed off as if the

recall them, as he turned the mottled shade of a partially steamed lobster. His eyes bulged a little more than they ordinarily do, a kind of glaze over them. He was staring stupidly at the door. Milton Minor had stopped blowing smoke rings. I hadn't noticed it before, but I knew that for a minute or so I hadn't seen any.

"—Don't stop, Mr. Mollinson. Go right ahead."

It was Bill Kent in the doorway. He was standing there very much at ease.

"She dresses remarkably well for the wife of a . . . what? We'd all like to hear the rest of it. Go ahead, pal. If you don't I'm coming over and knock your teeth down your nasty little throat. We're waiting."

The silence for a moment was profound. Then Ellery Seymour started to get to his feet.

"Sit down, Mr. Seymour," Bill Kent said. "And you too, Theodore." If Theodore Hallet had even attempted to get up I didn't see it. He looked like Lazarus before anything was done about him. "That goes for all of you, including you, Kramer. Any strong-arm stuff will be done by me and Mr. Mollinson."

He looked calmly back at Freddie. The incredible part of it, to me, was that from all outward appearances he was having a very good time.

"—You surely don't want to keep us waiting, Mr. Mollinson? *Sit down*, Mr. Stubblefield. I'm not one of your Assistant Executives, and I'm waiting for Mollinson to finish . . ."

Of course it was absurd. Freddie could no more have finished that sentence than he could have knocked Joe Louis out in the Yankee Stadium. He was a mass of quivering flesh, shaking so that it looked as if he'd spill off his chair and soak into the rug.

"You *can't* finish, Mollinson? Then get up on your feet and tell everybody here you're a lying little stinker, and you're sorry and you take it all back. Can you do that, Mollinson? And make it snappy. I'll give you ten seconds to start."

I don't know how Freddie got up, but he did. He dropped his napkin into his plate and knocked his fork off onto the floor and tipped over his wine glass, but he got up.

"I . . . I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I . . . shouldn't have said what I . . ."

"Okay," Bill Kent said. "Now if you'll excuse me, ladies and

gentlemen, I'm going to take my wife home. She's waiting downstairs."

With that he was gone. Freddie Mollinson tried to sit down, swayed and missed his chair. It was Mrs. Stubblefield who caught him. And Freddie Mollinson had fainted. When Mrs. Stubblefield tried to help him he fell in a heap on the floor.

It just shows how dreadful people really are. It was extremely fortunate, for what was going to be left of Freddie's *amour propre*, and indeed for the dignity of most of the rest of us, that no commercial photographer for whatever unholy reason was taking pictures of *that* dinner table. On Mr. Stubblefield's face was what I can only describe as an evil grin, and Milton Minor's was equally wicked. I must have looked pleased, myself, to say the least. It was the first time in anybody's memory that Freddie had been really called. It was certainly the first time Theodore Hallet had ever had to dump a pitcher of ice water in a guest's face regardless of the rug. Theodore is very careful about all his possessions. The only people who weren't grinning like zanies were Joe Kramer, who was totally bewildered, and Mrs. Stubblefield, who'd got her own glass of wine in her lap along with Freddie and was mopping it up with a linen and lace napkin, which she then emptied a couple of salt dishes on so it wouldn't stain, which was nice of her.

Ellery Seymour was helping Theodore revive Freddie, though I had the impression it would have been all right with him if Freddie had stayed unrevived permanently. Again, he must have had some dismay about where he'd be if Bill Kent started to check up on Freddie's facts as stated. He looked to me like an increasingly shattered man.

"I think it might be tactful if we all went somewhere else," I said, getting up. I was very sure Freddie wouldn't want to see any of us again that evening, if ever.

Seymour looked up over the edge of the table at me. "He hasn't got a heart condition, has he?"

"Shouldn't we determine first if he has a heart?" Milton Minor asked coolly.

"I think we ought to get him to bed and get a doctor." Theodore Hallet looked anxiously around, as if a bed and doctor ought to materialize from under the table because he needed one of each. "Where is Dorothy? She always knows what to do."

"Here I am." Dorothy was coming in, cool and competent, from the drawing room. "I think Mr. Kramer might lend a hand and get him upstairs. He'll be all right in a few minutes." She bent down and put her fingers on his pulse. "I'll send some aromatic spirits in for him. I think the rest of us can go in and have coffee."

She seemed to restore a proper dignity to the general burlesque. When I looked around they were carrying Freddie out to take him up the back stairs. That was a new experience too. Freddie's life was being definitely enriched, whatever may be said against shock treatment generally.

8

I said dignity was restored. Nevertheless, the conversation became so extraordinary, to my mind, in a few minutes that I couldn't at times really believe I was hearing what I thought I was.

"—*Why* did I miss that?" Dorothy said to me under her breath as I passed her, following Mr. Stubblefield through the door. "I just hope she's worth it. He's a good guy. He's *really* good."

Mr. Stubblefield moved on across the room. "I *like* that boy," he said heartily. He took his place in front of the fireplace, even more amiable and expansive than he'd been at dinner. "Now there's a man I'd like to have in my organization. I think I'll go over and tell him so."

Mr. Seymour shook his head. "I wouldn't, E. B. Unless you want to take Kramer with you. Better let things ride a few days."

He smiled at his chief and looked at Dorothy.

"I agree with Ellery, E. B.," she said. "I didn't realize what we've been keeping out in our stables. I thought it was just an ordinary domesticated animal like Theodore, or Milton, or you, E. B. Or are you domesticated?"

"I don't know why people think E. B. isn't a perfect husband," Mrs. Stubblefield said, with asperity. "The only trouble I've ever had with him is he won't take care of his health. He works himself to death. That's the reason I won't let him be President of the United States. I told Mr. Hallet. He'd kill himself in a year."

Mr. Stubblefield smiled at her with what seemed to me the first

sign of genuine humor I'd seen in him. "One reason's as good as another," he said. Still, he was pleased at the idea.

"I'm afraid it's going to upset Theodore, Mrs. Stubblefield," Dorothy said. "He's counting on it."

Mrs. Stubblefield shook her head. "No," she said.

Ellery Seymour frowned. Up to that point it hadn't occurred to me that he might seriously be thinking of the White House as a goal for the two of them. I looked at Milton Minor, sitting beside me, but he was blowing smoke rings again, trying this time to lasso his coffee cup. Before any of us could make the polite gesture of urging Mutton to change her mind and let him be President, Theodore and Joe Kramer came in. Theodore was more like a worried dormouse and less like a spearhead than ever.

"He's going home," he said. "I think somebody ought to go with him, but he's very firm. He wants to go alone."

"I wouldn't worry, dear," Dorothy said.

"But I am worried. Do you realize he had a *gun* in his pocket? He said he always carried it. Frankly, Dorothy, I think he's getting a little odd. He was talking about 'the Beast.' He said it was because of 'the Beast' he had to carry it."

Dorothy poured him and Joe Kramer a cup of coffee, laughing.

"That's the People, darling," she said. "Freddie's afraid somebody's going to take his money away from him. I've forgotten the quotation. He'll tell you some time. I like to think of Freddie at the barricades."

She turned to Mr. Stubblefield. "You know, he has a great deal of money in rubber, E. B. Are you really interested in rubber?"

It was the Dreamer-Scientist who answered.

"Of course E. B.'s interested in rubber," Ellery Seymour said. "Everybody is. And since everybody seems to know all about it, we might as well say we're negotiating for a plant in Louisiana, through the War Assets Administration. I'm sorry to say we haven't got any magic formula, as Mollinson seems to think. But we don't need one. We've got something better . . . we have E. B. Stubblefield. That's magic enough."

"—Please, Mrs. Stubblefield, *let* him be President! *Please* let him be President, won't you?"

I caught my breath and held it. This time, I thought, Milton Minor really had torn it. Not even Enoch B. Stubblefield could

swallow that. For a moment the silence seemed to me to be ghastly.

Milton looked calmly at Mrs. Stubblefield and then as calmly around at the rest of us, with all the self-assurance in the world. "I'm quite serious. If E. B. can beat the rubber game, and I'm sure he can, he's exactly the man we need, in times like these."

I heard him say the last because I was right beside him. I don't know how many of the rest of them did. There was a sudden crash. Joe Kramer was standing by Dorothy, seated at the coffee table. It was his cup and saucer that had hit the silver tray and smashed into a dozen pieces. He was staring at the mantel.

"—The gun, Chief. It's gone."

Everybody else was staring at him, and then at the mantelpiece. He was certainly right. There was a small black cigarette box, usually on the console table, against the wall where the gun had been. If it was a piece of misdirection it was unnecessary, because I'm sure nobody had even thought of the gun after the episode of Freddie Mollinson and Bill Kent.

"—The dumb ox," Milton remarked very quietly to me. "Of course it's gone. What the hell did he expect?" He looked at the blond young giant curiously. "What's he all of a heap so for? Tell me that, lady."

"It *can't* be gone!"

Dorothy got quickly to her feet.

"It can't possibly!"

She stopped, looking at the mantelpiece and the cigarette box Kramer held in his hand, leaned forward quickly and pressed the bell at the side of the chimney breast.

"One of the servants must have put it away somewhere." She was cool and practical again. "It's absurd to think any one of us would have taken it. Adams was clearing up around here while we were at dinner."

Milton Minor groaned. "I *do* believe," he muttered. "—They're going to interview the staff. Where have I read that before? Come on, Grace. Let's shove."

I nodded. It also looked as if we were going to play Button, Button. Theodore was reaching into the flat-backed crocus vase that made the end piece of the mantel garniture, and Mutton was lifting the brocaded down cushion on the love seat.

Milton got up. "I'd like to stay to see this through, Dorothy of course," he said, "but Grace here has to get up at five o'clock in the morning. I think I'd better take her home. You'll excuse us won't you, darling? Do you want to search us before we go?"

They didn't, and we went. Mrs. Stubblefield was really sweet about it. She thought five o'clock was much too early for anybody to get up who hadn't planned on it and gone to bed at nine. It was then almost eleven.

"Why don't you try writing fiction instead of biography?" I asked as we got into my car down on Massachusetts Avenue below Water-side Drive.

Milton shrugged. "Quelle différence, chère madame?"

I shook my head.

"Mr. Stubblefield appalls me. I've met a lot of big industrialists, but they're quiet and unpretentious people. This man acts as if he thought he was a cross between Henry Ford, Henry Kaiser, Henry Garsson and Henry VIII. If I'd been Ellery Seymour I'd have swatted him in the nose. I really would."

"Oh no, you wouldn't," Milton said coolly. "You'd be used to the needling by now. Any parlor psychiatrist could figure it out. E. B. knows he's pretty dependent on Seymour, and he's not nearly as much at home in the Monde as Seymour. He does it to get under his skin, and Seymour knows it. He's plenty smart. He's also a nice guy and pretty honest."

"You mean about the magic? That long speech he made? Was that smart? Or honest?"

"I left the answer book in my other pants," Milton said. "I'll tell you tomorrow, or next year."

We were crossing the P Street Bridge. The rain had stopped, but it was still hot and muggy. Milton lighted a cigarette and threw it out the window after the first puff. He wiped the damp shreds of tobacco off his lips with the back of his hand.

"God, I hate Washington," he said. "The climate stinks."

As that's so axiomatic it hardly needs the constant restatement it gets, I let it go. I was looking across him to see if there was a light in the yellow brick house in the block before mine.

"Oh, good!" I exclaimed.

"Good what? I see no good in anything."

"I do," I said. "Colonel Primrose is back. Now we can—"

He interrupted me with a groan. "Look, Grace. Why don't you marry the guy and let it go at that?"

"If everybody would shut up, I might," I said. "I'm not going to be forced into it to satisfy my friends or spite Sergeant Buck. I don't want to compete with Mr. and Mrs. North, and I've always believed Holmes gave Doctor Watson's wife an obscure poison—you remember she died awful quick. I don't dare break up the Primrose-Buck menage if I want to keep my health . . . and anyway my kids don't like the idea."

"Let's say I never brought it up at all."

I made a U-turn in the block and stopped in front of my own door.

"What about giving me a drink before I go?" Milton said. "It's only quarter past eleven, and your dusky duenna's still up."

The light was on down in the kitchen, and from the wreck of an old pickup truck parked in front of me it was apparent that Lilac was entertaining.

"Anyway, I want to use your phone. My vitals are being gnawed by curiosity."

We went inside. While I hung up my wrap he went on into the dining room and mixed himself a blend and soda. He came back into the sitting room holding it up distastefully.

"This the best you've got? I'll see what Stubblefield Enterprises has on tap tomorrow. Where's the phone?"

I pointed to the desk in the corner.

"211, isn't it." He flicked the dial. "I'll pay the bill, so don't look like that.—This is Hobart 6363. I want to speak to the Chief of Police in Livingstone, Montana. Livingstone. Chief of Police. No, it's not a gag. No, I don't know his name. Give me the charges when you're through, will you?"

Sheila was galloping around, whacking the tables with her tail, delighted to have somebody home again, and while I quieted her I listened to Milton. Montana was where he'd said the lady in black was supposed to be buried. I sat with my hand on Sheila's head looking at him, but he just smiled and waited, making marks on my fresh desk pad.

At last his face brightened. "Hello—Chief? This is Captain Charles Lamb, Washington, D. C., Homicide."

"—His name's Albert," I said.

"I'm checking on a woman—think you know her," he went on. "Bertha Taylor. Mrs. Lawrence Taylor. Thought you would. She still in town?"

He listened, nodding his head at me like a papier maché toy that keeps on wagging until the momentum gives out. "She was? Six o'clock. Okay, thanks. No, nothing special—routine check-up. I'll send you a report. Thanks, Chief."

He put the phone down.

"You see? Bertha Taylor's still in Livingstone. She had a police escort home at six o'clock. Mrs. Taylor being a harmless dipso they try to keep out from under heavy traffic. So, she isn't in Washington. Simple?"

"How did you know?"

The phone rang, and he answered it. "Three minutes, \$2.70 plus tax," he repeated. "Thanks very much."

He took two dollars and seventy-five cents out of his pocket and put it on the table.

"I'll contribute five cents toward the tax and you can stand the difference. And I'll make it good with Lamb in the morning."

"I want to know how you knew about Bertha Taylor," I said.

He brought his highball over and sat down beside me.

"I know a lot of things. I know more about E. B., and Ellery Seymour, and Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises, than they know themselves. I used to be a working reporter. Remember?"

"I thought it was you who'd forgotten," I said. "So who is Bertha Taylor?"

He put his glass down. "Have you ever been out to Coney Island early Monday morning before they clean up the beach? Orange skins, banana peels, egg-shells, litter, all washed up, empty and sodden? Well, that's Bertha Taylor. She's one of the old orange peels washed up on the beach of this our life."

He grinned to show he wasn't really being as serious as he was.

"She used to be different—same like the oranges before lunch or Sunday. I made a stop-over once just to have a look at her. I thought it really was she today. I still believe in miracles, I guess. I thought she *could* have pulled out of it."

"Who is she, Milton?" I demanded.

"Let's call her E. B.'s conscience and let it go at that. Unless you

mean this dame in black here today. I don't know who she is."

He stared thoughtfully at his neutral spirit.

"But I'm going to find out. I'm also going to find out whose idea she was. In fact, I think I'll start now."

He drained his glass and got up. But he didn't go. He stood fumbling absently at his pack of damp cigarettes.

"I don't get it," he said at last. "I don't get any of it, including this new plant in Louisiana. Do you suppose Bill Kent's a crook—or is it our little Susan? Or do you suppose the guy's really got a new polymer? Could be, you know."

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know what a polymer is."

"I don't either. But it's something you put with something else, a sort of regrouping of certain molecules. You stir 'em all up and get synthetic rubber. There are different kinds, depending on the process. GRS—that was the stuff they made out of butadiene and styrene. General purpose rubber, they called it. They used petroleum. They used alcohol for a while, but petroleum's cheaper. There's some stuff called Neoprene, but it's a special purpose product—resistant to heat and gas for things like inner tubes. It's too complicated for me. But I know there's a desperate still hunt on for a way to make a synthetic rubber for general purposes that's as good as Neoprene for specialized use. It's going to come, they say. And the guy that gets it—if he can make it cheap, and they think he can—he'll have something, believe me. And just think what's going to happen to World Economy. I'll bet the State Department's turning over in its grave already."

"Could anybody like Bill Kent find it?" I asked. "I mean, he can't have much of a laboratory to work in."

He shrugged. "They tell me you could cook it up on the kitchen stove if you knew what you were doing. I wonder. He wouldn't be with Rubber Reserve unless he was interested. And he's a pretty confident guy, isn't he? He might just have something to bargain with. I wonder, Grace. Did you notice when it was the little lady decided she didn't feel well? It was precisely when our Freddie spilled the beans about a new process of some kind. Maybe she's been talking out of turn and Bill doesn't know it yet. As I said before, Ellery Seymour's nobody's fool."

He went to the door.

"Well, so long. I'll call you in the morning. It's nice to be back here, Grace. You're one of my favorite women east of the Rocky Mountains."

9

Milton Minor hadn't more than closed the front door, it seemed to me, when I heard a soft double-quick sound of the brass knocker. As I got up I looked around to see what the gifted biographer and amateur detective had left behind that he had to come back for. But there was nothing but the \$2.75, which was clearly mine for the Telephone Company. Sheila stretched and got up and proceeded ahead of me along the hall. When I opened the front door it took me a long fraction of an instant to adjust to the fact that it wasn't Milton out there. I stood stupidly in the doorway, thinking I must be slightly touched in the head. It couldn't be Dorothy Hallet, at that time of night and in those clothes, no matter how much the face looked like hers.

"Don't just stand there, Grace—let me in," she said urgently. "You've got to do something for me. Go change your dress and come along. Hurry. It's getting terribly late."

She took the doorknob out of my hand and pushed the door shut.

"I know you think I've lost my mind."

It was an understatement. I looked at the old raincoat she had on, the gray scarf she had tied around her head and the stained sneakers on her feet. She was trying to look a lot calmer than even in the dimly lighted hallway I could see she was.

"Where are we going, first?" I said. "It looks like a rag-pickers' convention to me."

I went back into the sitting room. "You can take five minutes to tell me. It can't be as urgent as all this."

"It is, though," she said quickly. She reached in her pocket, took out a folded sheet of notepaper, and handed it abruptly over to me.

"Dear Mrs. Hallet," I read. "I hope you'll forgive my intrusion of this afternoon. I'm sorry it had to be at your house, and you were very kind to me. I have some information that I think you ought to have. I wouldn't have bothered to offer it to you, however, if

you hadn't been so gracious. I am at 801 Eye Street tonight. It's a cheap boarding house. My room is Number 6, to the left of the head of the stairs. The front door's open until about half-past twelve, and I'll be there. I'm getting out early in the morning. The climate here isn't healthy. If you don't care to come I'm trusting to you to destroy this. It's very important to you, and I hope you'll come, for your own good. You don't know what some of the people around you are like. I'll wait up till they lock the door."

I read it through again.

"Where did you get this, Dorothy?"

"It was under the box of cleansing tissues in the powder room. The maid brought it up after everybody had left."

"But you're not going?"

"I'm certainly going. Alone, if you're afraid to go with me."

I shook my head.

"I'm too old to take a dare, angel, and it's raining cats and dogs and I think you're crazy anyway. Listen. Bertha Taylor is out in Livingstone, Montana." I told her about Milton's call. "Whoever this woman is, she isn't Mrs. Lawrence Taylor."

"All the more reason, then," she answered evenly. "Are you coming with me?"

"I don't know," I said. "I think it's foolhardy in the first place. Why didn't you take Theodore—"

"Theodore!" she said. "He'd be as much use as a paralyzed rabbit. Anyway, he's still looking under cushions and emptying out drawers looking for the missing gun."

"Nobody found it?"

She looked away abruptly.

"Dorothy!" I said. "Where is the gun? Do you know?"

"No, I don't." She turned back. "I did know. I took it off the mantel. I don't know now, because it's gone again. And for some reason or other, that's part of why I want to go and see this woman."

"You think it was hers?"

"I know it wasn't. It belonged to me, Grace—it was my gun."

"Oh," I said. I couldn't think of anything else.

"Ellery got it for me two months ago. I asked him to, because I'm like everybody else, I've suddenly got scared of my own shadow. I'm scared now. I don't know how the gun got in the library. It was upstairs in my sitting-room desk the last I saw it. And

I didn't want anybody starting to trace it back to me, because I didn't want Theodore lecturing me on law and order. That's why I wanted it left on the mantel, so I could get it."

"After you did, what happened to it?"

"That's what I was going to ask you," she said calmly. "I put it under the cushion where you and Milton Minor had been sitting. I had to hurry. Bill Kent barged in at that point defending Susan's honor. I didn't want to have to go into a song and dance about why I was standing in the living room with a gun in my hand.—You didn't take it?"

"I certainly did not," I said.

"Did Milton?"

I shook my head. "I didn't see him. I haven't any reason to think he did."

Dorothy Hallet smiled. It was a brief automatic movement of her lips without humor or meaning.

"You don't trust him any more than I do, darling. I know he can be amusing, but he's a louse, Grace, and you know it as well as I do."

"Let's stick to the point," I said. "I don't think he took the gun. Does it make a lot of difference anyway? It was empty, and I assume it wasn't registered—"

She interrupted me. "It isn't registered. And it isn't empty either. What do you think of that, darling?"

"But it was empty," I said. "What do you mean? Did you load it?"

I tried to speak quietly, realizing with a curious kind of remembered hearing that we'd been snapping at each other like a couple of angry fishwives. I was also a little stunned, at the moment.

"No. I didn't. That's what's so interesting. Mr. Joe Kramer didn't unload it. Not entirely. He only pretended to. He left three shells in it." She paused to let that register in my blurred unhappy mind. "And don't ask me why, dear, because I haven't any more idea than you. When I opened it, there were three shells. Nobody else had a chance to touch the thing. But let's skip that. Will you come with me, or won't you?"

She took the sheet of notepaper out of my hands and put it in her pocket.

"Oh, please, Grace!" she said quickly. Her voice was suddenly full of entreaty. "I wouldn't ask you if there was anybody else. It's terribly important to me. I'll tell you, some time."

"All right," I said. "I'm a fool. I've always known that. I didn't think you were one. I thought you were the sanest woman I've ever known."

"Change your dress. And hurry, Grace, won't you?"

I was even fool enough to take my own car, because I thought I was the saner of the two at the moment. And I was sane enough when we passed Colonel Primrose's house, where the downstairs lights were still on, to wish we could stop and take him and/or Sergeant Buck along. But I knew better than to suggest that to Dorothy.

I don't imagine 801 I Street is a particularly prepossessing place at any time, but at ten minutes past twelve on a hot heavy night it was frighteningly ominous. It was a high mansard-roofed Victorian house that had seen a lot better days. It was set back from the sidewalk behind a broken-down iron fence. A dilapidated doll buggy lay on its side in the yard, which was barren of grass or even weeds and full of mud puddles glinting under the street light. Radios were still blaring out from other open windows along the street, but there was no sound from 801. Its windows were open, but they were dark and empty, and the limp gray curtains hung despondently still, like old ghosts too tired to move. The front door was standing open. A dim light coming down the stairs made it seem darker, some way, than the flat lighted surface of the ornate façade.

I pulled on the car brake reluctantly and switched off the motor. The street light there was vaguely comforting, but not enough to take the curse off the place in general. I was hoping Dorothy would change her mind.

"I've seen more attractive spots," I said.

"Don't be a snob. Grace."

"I'm not a snob, I'm a coward. Are you sure this is it?"

She held the note down under the map light. It still said "801," and a gilt "801" peeling off the transom over the door in front of us was still visible. She put her hand on the car door and opened it.

We got out with a show of being casual and perfectly at home

that must have looked as false as it was, and went through the missing gate and around the holes in the walk where the bricks were missing too, to the front steps. They were solid enough, stone worn concave, and with the remnants of the day's garbage on them. We went inside. The air was fetid with a hundred smells and the wainscoting on the stairs, as we made our way quickly up, not daring to stop for fear one of the blank doors on the ground floor would open, was broken and mouldy where the plaster oozed out. With every step we took the stairs creaked loudly enough to wake the dead. If it hadn't been for the light on the second floor, dispelling the shadows, I don't think I'd have gone on up to the landing. It was a naked light, with gnats and midges flying around it, and a big moth miller that barged in and out, striking it and falling, and recovering to strike again. That was the only sign of life I could see or hear as we got to the top step and Dorothy pulled me around to the left. There was a door there with a brass "6" nailed to the middle panel.

She held tightly to my arm, whether for support or to keep me from deserting her I didn't know, raised her other hand and knocked. The door was heavy and she knocked lightly, but even then it sounded like a hammer thud in the dense silence around us. She started violently at the sound, and knocked again.

"—I know this is the place."

"There's a light, if that helps," I said. I could see the yellow shadow under the warped door sill.

She knocked again. There was no answer.

"I'm going in," she said.

I felt her body tense abruptly as she put her hand out, took the knob and turned it. It wasn't locked. She pushed the door open. For the fraction of an instant she held it there, partly open. She gasped a little.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she said.

She closed the door quickly and stepped back, shaking like a leaf.

"It's . . . it's somebody else," she gasped. "It's not she at all. Come on. Let's get out."

She caught my arm and dragged me to the top of the stairs, and with no effort at all on her part. Then she stopped. Her grip on my arm was practically breaking it, and her face in the naked glare from the stained brown ceiling was a ghastly yellow-gray.

"I'm going back, Grace. There's . . . something funny in there."

I went back with her. She hesitated for an instant before she put her hand on the knob again. Then she turned it and flung the door open.

She was right, in a way. It wasn't Mrs. Lawrence Taylor. It was a blond woman. She was sitting up in bed, the overhead light brassy on her hair and on her face and her bare slender shoulders. She was propped up against the pillows. The bed was iron, painted green and peeling.

She was staring straight at us. It was only the horrible rigidity of the staring blue eyes that indicated she was dead. Except for that she might have been alive, just looking at us.

We stood there in the doorway, it seemed a very long time in what could only have been a brief space. I remember thinking, then, that it was no wonder the house was empty. As we looked at her we could see something neither of us had seen before. It was moving slowly, like a scarlet snake, down both sides of her neck, from the wound behind her ear.

Dorothy's hand caught mine. It seemed very warm, because my own was frozen cold.

"Who is it, Grace?" she whispered.

"It's whoever Mrs. Lawrence Taylor was," I said.

I nodded to the littered bureau by the window. A gray wig was lying on it. On the back of an old wooden rocking chair there was a black dress, a pair of sodden black strapped slippers on the floor beside it. On the closet door, arranged neatly on a wire hanger, was a blue print dress. It wasn't an expensive dress but it was pretty, and the white collars and cuffs were freshly crisp.

"Oh, dear God, if we'd only come sooner," Dorothy said softly. "We mustn't stay now. We'll find a drugstore and call the police."

We went out, and she closed the door.

"—Good-by," she said. "I'm so terribly sorry . . ."

It was the girl on the bed she was talking to.

We got out of the silent house and into my car and drove down to the corner. The drugstore there was closed.

"We might as well go home," I said.

Dorothy nodded.

"And we've got to call Colonel Primrose."

She nodded again. "You call. I don't think I can talk straight. Oh, Grace, who could have done it? I can't believe it, Grace!"

I've never seen Dorothy Hallet cry before. And I let her cry. Tears are very useful things for any woman. I could have cried myself, a little later . . . cried or laughed, or maybe both, I don't really know. It was when I called Colonel Primrose. I called him first, before I called Captain Lamb of the Homicide Division of the Washington Police Department.

It was Sergeant Buck who answered the phone. His voice froze instantly at the sound of mine.

"The Colonel ain't at home, ma'am."

The impropriety, the time of night, the whole outrage to the decent structure of society, was implicit in that reply.

"Look, Sergeant Buck," I said. "This isn't personal. A woman is dead. I've got to talk to him. Where is he? I've really got to get in touch with him."

It's still hard to believe, but even Sergeant Buck couldn't have thought it up if it hadn't been the mortal truth.

"The Colonel's at Walter Reed Hospital, ma'am," Sergeant Buck said. "You can't see him this time, ma'am. The Colonel's got the measles."

10

I put down the telephone. "Colonel Primrose has the measles."

"Oh, for heaven's sake." Dorothy Hallet spoke with the complete disgust one usually reserves for the inevitable perversity of dogs, children, inanimate objects and one's own husband. "What else?"

She meant the rest of my conversation with the Colonel's guard, philosopher and friend Sergeant Buck . . . if the brass-bound monosyllables I got in reply to my semi-hysterical demands could be so called.

"I'm to keep out of it—the Colonel won't like it," I said. "He assumes I'm in it alone. He wanted to know if anybody saw me. I said I didn't think anybody did. He's going to call the police, so that lets us out for the moment.—Or does it?" I added uncertainly. "I don't know."

"I don't, either."

Dorothy bit her lower lip and drummed her fingers on the table.

"I think you ought to talk to Colonel Primrose anyway, Grace. Measles aren't mumps. I mean he can still talk, can't he?"

"Not at Walter Reed. General Beach would fire anybody who let a patient be disturbed at this time of night."

"Then we ought to call the police." She went abruptly over to the desk. "It's stupid not to. It looks as if we had something to hide."

I've never known where the idea came from that the looks of things are invariably incorrect, but I didn't say anything. I wasn't too sure that Sergeant Buck wasn't putting something his Colonel wouldn't like above ordinary common sense. Dorothy picked up the phone. I could hear the dial tone zinging monotonously away.

"—On the other hand," she said evenly, "it could be something else, couldn't it? I'd give almost anything to stay out of it if we can. After all, we're just taking it for granted it has to do with us. A woman like that could easily . . ."

She stopped, biting her lip again. "I don't know why I had to say that. I sound like Freddie Mollinson. I don't know anything about her. She wasn't living in style, Lord knows. Still, I don't want to do anything crazy."

She put the phone down and moved away from it.

"It seems so unbelievable. It's just too ghastly to be real. Still, I . . . I mean, if it *was* any of us, I don't want to seem to be getting out of it just for my own comfort."

She went over to the cold fireplace and stood with her back to me, her head bent down.

"It's Theodore I'm thinking about, really. He'll be horribly upset. He'll think I went out and did it all on purpose to ruin his new career. Oh, I *wish* we hadn't gone!"

I did too, though not for Theodore's sake.

Dorothy dropped her hands to her sides and turned around.

"I've got to go home, Grace, and you've got to come with me. I just can't face it alone. I'd go all to pieces. Please come. In the morning we'll decide what we ought to do. You will, won't you? I'm a wreck, and I don't want to quarrel with him."

I didn't want to go, and I shouldn't have gone, but somehow I hated to let her go alone. I knew I ought to stay at home, which was no doubt one of the reasons I wrote Lilac a note instead of

going downstairs and telling her in person. She likes people to be where they're supposed to be at all times.

I left the lights on and put the note in the middle of the floor where she couldn't miss it, and Dorothy and I left—in Dorothy's car, which was another mistake.

Massachusetts Avenue was as empty as a village street as we drove around Sheridan Circle and on up to the Halletts' house. It was still lighted and awake.

"Oh, I hoped he'd gone to bed," Dorothy said. She sagged a little against the door, fumbling for the lock with her key. "He's probably still hunting for the gun, and we'll have to have a post-mortem—" She caught her breath. ". . . have to rehash the whole afternoon. It'll take hours and hours."

Inside the hall she stopped and stood quietly, listening. She went over to the foot of the marble staircase and listened again, her face brightening.

"Maybe he's not in yet himself. Maybe he went over to commiserate with Freddie."

"He's probably in bed," I said.

"Not with all these lights on. It wastes electricity. He must be out. Come along, quickly. Let's hurry."

It must have been our sense of guilt that made us tiptoe up the stairs and Dorothy whisper to me as we looked into the big drawing-room. "Sometimes I hate this place. It's so pretentious these days, and so stupid for just two people."

It didn't look pretentious, but it did look strangely empty and unreal. The softly shaded lights were still on, but the balcony windows had been closed and locked. Dorothy backed out, snapping down the wall switch to blot the room into momentary oblivion, and pulled the massive carved mahogany door shut quietly for the night.

We went on around to the next flight of stairs like a couple of professional thieves and went up, Dorothy ahead of me listening back for the sound of Theodore's key in the downstairs lock. At the top she turned toward her own door. She took two steps and came to an abrupt halt, her body stiffening. She was looking across the hall at her sitting-room door.

It was open and the lights were on, and that's where Theodore was. He wasn't out visiting his sick friend. He was bent over the

bottom drawer of Dorothy's desk. The top of it was littered with papers and the whole thing in a beautiful mess.

Dorothy went quickly across the hall to the door.

"Are you looking for something, Theodore?"

I was surprised at her extraordinary calm. I'd expected her to snap his head off. Theodore Hallet jumped as if somebody had found the gun and fired it three inches behind his head. He got tangled up with the drawer and the chair legs, but he managed to get to his feet, and I've never seen anybody look so precisely like a man who'd been caught going through his wife's desk drawers when he thought she wasn't at home. He was not only a worried but an extremely embarrassed dormouse. He was still in white shirt and black tie, but he'd taken off his dinner jacket and had on a blue brocaded dressing gown that came just above the knees of his black trousers. Blue leather slippers had taken the place of his patent evening pumps. His face was flushed much redder than his hair. Theodore looked generally not very happy.

"I'm very sorry, Dorothy. But I had to find it. I looked all over the house for you, but you weren't here. Where on earth have you been? The phone's been ringing, and nobody seems to know anything. I've got to have it, right away. I have to check it before I go to bed."

"I don't know what it is you're talking about, Theodore," Dorothy said coolly. I thought she looked relieved at that. She probably had some idea—which I certainly had—that Theodore was still hunting the gun.

"The list, Dorothy. The guest list E. B. sent us. You've realized its significance in view of what happened this afternoon. I knew you had before the Stubblefields left. That's why I was surprised not to find you in the house. I thought you might have some suggestion about what I ought to do?"

Dorothy shook her head. "I'm afraid I missed the significance of the guest list, dear. I didn't know it had any except to let in believers and keep scoffers out. I gave it to Haste to check at the door."

"But not the original, Dorothy." Theodore sounded as worried as if she'd tossed out a Gutenberg Bible or the holograph manuscript of the Merchant of Venice. "Oh, dear me, I certainly thought you'd keep a copy of it for my files if nothing else. After all, in a way this

was the opening gun in my campaign for Mr. Stubblefield."

At any other time I think Dorothy would not have let that pass. At the moment it was no doubt best to avoid all unnecessary mention of guns.

"I'm sorry, Theodore. It was stupid, I suppose, but I just never thought of it. Probably Mr. Stubblefield's secretary has a copy, and I know the people I invited. I still don't see the significance of it, if you don't mind."

"You've been too overwrought to think incisively, then," Theodore said, rather kindly. "It's clear to me. I've been expecting some form of attack from the politicians. You said yourself I'd run into a lot of opposition. There's no doubt in my mind that whoever introduced that gun into the house this afternoon did it for the purpose of discrediting me. The morning papers will certainly carry a story about it. You have enough political sense to realize that, Dorothy."

Dorothy was silent, and so was I behind her, though I don't think Theodore was conscious that I was there in the hall.

"It's very distressing," he said. "And I'm distressed about Susan Kent. It's unfortunate for that sweet child to be involved in machine politics. It was perfectly natural for her to pick up the gun, seeing it lying there and realizing what it meant. She knows it doesn't belong here, because I've told her I don't allow firearms in the house."

Theodore moved the chair back and came away from the desk.

"I'm going to contact the F. B. I. in the morning. And I want the list to compare with the people we know were here. There's no doubt we can trace the thing down. Meanwhile, I think you ought to go to bed, Dorothy. You'll think more clearly in the morning. Good night."

"I hope so," Dorothy said. "Good night, Theodore."

When he'd closed the door of his apartment she took off her raincoat and laid it across the back of a chair, moving slowly, as if the absurd unreality of the whole thing was too much for her.

"Come on, Grace," she said. "Let's go to bed. I'll clean up the desk in the morning. Men are children, they tell me, so let's let it go at that. Maybe it'll all look different tomorrow."

But it didn't. It looked the same, only an awful lot worse.

I woke up out of a sound sleep in the morning and sat abruptly up in bed. Dorothy was coming across the sunlit room in her nightgown, her feet bare, her face pale and her lips without color of any

kind, artificial or natural. Her brown eyes were dilated. She was the most startling figure of urgency and panic and general dismay that I've ever opened my eyes to.

"—Read this, Grace." She thrust the morning paper into my hand and collapsed on the side of my bed. "Just read it."

I read it. It wasn't hard to do—it was all across the top of the front page.

"Police Hunt Missing Socialite in Show Girl Murder."

"Go on. Read the rest of it."

Dorothy sounded like the muted voice of doom itself.

"Police last night predicted early and startling developments in the cold-blooded murder of Betty Livingstone, beautiful blond show girl, shot through the head shortly before midnight in a theatrical boarding house at 801 I Street N. W.

"A luxurious motor car belonging by registration to a well-known Washington woman whose name is being withheld by the police was traced to her swank Georgetown residence. Detectives were informed by the household servants that the woman herself had left the house and her present whereabouts were unknown. It was learned, however, that her departure was hurried, as her fashionable evening gown had been thrown on the floor and an unidentified costume pulled hastily out of the closet.

"The police were able to trace the car by the presence of mind of Mrs. Mamie Kelly, proprietress of the boarding house where the tragedy occurred. Mrs. Kelly was sitting with a friend in the adjacent house, and saw the car stop. For unexplained reasons she was suspicious of it and took down the license number. She saw a woman go into the house and heard the car leave shortly after. She did not hear the shot, as she was listening to a radio program at the time. She was unaware of the tragedy until she went to the second floor with her friend to get a cold bottle of beer and looked across the yard to her own house (Pictures on Page 2). She saw Betty Livingstone through the open window on the bed. She thought nothing of it until she went home a few minutes later and stopped in the girl's room to turn off the light. Finding Miss Livingstone dead, she called the police at once.

"No motive could be assigned to what is called one of the most cold-blooded of recent crimes. There was no evidence of struggle, and nothing was found to be missing from the room.

"Mrs. Kelly stated that Betty Livingstone came Monday afternoon, and arranged for the room for Tuesday night. She explained to Mrs. Kelly that she was taking part in theatricals at a private house and wanted to be near by.

"The search for the missing socialite is being rigorously conducted, with the airport, bus and railway stations under all-night observation."

Dorothy Hallet's reaction having been what it was, it's reasonable to expect mine to have been the same. I should have been appalled and horrified, I suppose. But I wasn't. I was just mad as blazes. At Captain Lamb, at Sergeant Buck, at Colonel John Primrose for having the measles, and at the household servants in my swank Georgetown residence, which were Lilac—unless, of course, Julius was spending the night with her, which I'd definitely forbidden him to do since their last divorce.

I put the paper down, got up and went into Dorothy's room, leaving her sitting dumfounded on the side of the bed, and picked up the telephone. I dialed Hobart 6363.

"Lilac," I said. I knew very well from the way she said "Hello" that there must be half a dozen detectives sitting around the house, their ears to upstairs extensions, just waiting for this to happen. "What is all this nonsense? Where's the note I left you?"

"It's in th' garbage can, Mis' Grace. Tha's where I put it."

It was a fitting place, no doubt. I hoped the detectives were making a beeline for it. I went on severely, conscious of an unseen audience.

"Get it and give it to Captain Lamb if he's there. And let me speak to him. He is there, isn't he?"

"Yes, ma'am. Jus' havin' a cup of coffee. He been here mos' all night. The Sergeant, he here too."

"I want to speak to Captain Lamb," I said.

I recognized the burly voice of the Chief of Homicide of the District Police.

"Hello, Mrs. Latham. Where the hell are you?"

"Don't be absurd," I said. "I'm at the Theodore Hallets on Massachusetts Avenue. You can come out here, or if you'll wait till I get dressed and get a cup of coffee I'll come in there. Just don't let anybody haul my luxurious car away— it'll fall to pieces."

I take it he'd read the papers too. I heard a sound that could have been noncommittal mirth.

"I'll be out, Mrs. Latham. I've been worried to death about you, lady."

11

I put the phone down. Dorothy had come to the door and was standing there, looking at me in a sort of blank bewilderment.

"I'm sorry, darling," I said. "But after all, there's no use my being a fool about this, is there? This is one time I'm on the side of law and order."

She nodded. "We both are. We should have called them last night." She went over to the breakfast tray her maid had brought with the papers and that she'd pushed to the foot of the bed when she came in my room. "Have a cup of coffee. Some more's coming up. I'll take a shower and get ready first. I only hope to God Theodore doesn't wake up till they've come and gone."

While I drank the coffee I read the paper again, more slowly and with a less egocentric emphasis. There were several points, I thought, that were more important to myself as a socialite—which seems to be a term applied to anybody mixed up with murder who isn't actively on relief, and was all of a piece with my fashionable evening gown, now five years old but undoubtedly on the floor, though I'd thrown it across the foot of the bed before I dashed off to 801 I Street with Dorothy. The girl's name was Betty Livingstone, not Bertha Taylor. There was no mention in the paper of the gray wig and the black dress and scarf. And the landlady had only seen one woman go into the house.

"Look, Dorothy," I said. She was coming out of the bathroom, putting on her slip. "Why don't you stay out of this? There's no use in both of us being plastered all over the front page. Mamie Kelly only saw one of us."

She shook her head. "It's all right to be quixotic, dear, but there's no point in carrying it too far. Anyway . . ." She looked up at me with grave steady eyes. "I thought we'd agreed which side we were on in all this. I don't want to appear noble, darling . . . but I be-

lieve in the pragmatic test. I never tell a lie unless I'm sure I can get away with it."

She went over to the closet and got out a dress.

"I wish you'd hurry. I'll go on down and be there when they come."

I finished my coffee and toast and went into my own room. I was just coming out of the shower when Dorothy appeared in the doorway again, dressed and ready to go downstairs.

"What did I do with that note I had last night, Grace? I didn't give it to you, did I? The one I had from Bertha Taylor."

I shook my head. "It was in your raincoat pocket."

"That's what I thought, but it isn't there now." She looked at me thoughtfully. "I hope I haven't lost it—I'd like it for evidence." She hesitated. "You don't suppose Theodore took it, by any chance?"

"For heaven's sake, what for?" I said. "It wouldn't be much use in a collection of State Papers. You must have dropped it when we got out of the car."

She shrugged. "I just thought I'd show it to Captain Lamb."

She smiled faintly.

"This keeps Theodore from having to call in the F. B. I., anyway. But as Mr. Stubblefield says, one gets used to having kindness repaid in counterfeit coin. Come on down when you're ready. Or wait until they get here, why don't you? We might as well be casual about this."

I finished dressing quickly, assuming of course that if I'd been the object of an all-night hunt around the bus terminal Captain Lamb would be over as fast as possible. The room I was in was on the side of the house overlooking the terraced bank sloping down to the road into the Park, not the balcony side. It had a bowed window arrangement, so I could see the entrance end of the drive in from the street. I went over and looked out. There was no sign of a police car as yet. I glanced the other way. The attractively re-decorated stables were at the end of the flagged path, and as I looked out I saw the door open and Bill Kent come out, on his way downtown to his office. At least I assumed so, as it was twelve minutes past eight and he had a brief case in his hand.

I watched him go along the path to the street without looking back, and the reason I noticed that was, I'd seen Susan looking out of the window at him, probably waiting to wave him good-by. I

glanced back at her window. She was holding the curtain a little to one side, still standing there. I heard a bus go by, and saw it as I looked the other way. When I looked back she was gone from the window. That wasn't surprising, but before I looked away the door opened again, and Susan whipped out, hat on, gloves and bag in her hand, coming along with every outward sign of somebody in a terrific hurry to get where she was going.

As she ran out the driveway gate and across the street, a cab swerved over and braked to a stop at the curb. Susan opened the door and got in and the cab zoomed off again down Massachusetts Avenue. Which again wasn't surprising, although the ordinary domestic procedure of a husband and wife going downtown at the same time would be for them to go together in either bus or taxi and not separately in one of each. But what happened next was surprising, or perhaps startling is a better term.

Bill Kent came suddenly into view again on the sidewalk in front of the open gateway. Whether he had missed his bus, or come back for something he'd forgotten, I had no idea. But he'd definitely seen Susan. He stood on the street watching her taxi disappear for quite a long time, so long in fact that it was more than evident he was flabbergasted by the performance. Then he tossed his cigarette abruptly out into the road and came deliberately back along the flagstone path, his head bent forward so that I couldn't see his face. He stopped and fished around in his pocket for his key, put it in the lock, opened the door and closed it behind him. I had the impression of a bewildered and perturbed young man.

"Oh, dear!" I thought.

I didn't have a chance to think more. Captain Lamb's car was coming up the drive. I left the window, borrowed a handkerchief on my way through Dorothy's room and went on downstairs, with enough on my mind to make Susan and Bill Kent's problems unimportant for the moment. And at that point I didn't know I had to face Sergeant Phineas T. Buck as well as Captain Lamb. Nor did I know that Theodore Hallet was so determined to spearhead Mr. Enoch B. Stubblefield's political aspirations that he was ready to louse up everything to that end. I should use his own more polite phrase, perhaps, which was that no stone must be left unturned to bring the dastard to justice. Dorothy and I had a tacit if unspoken agreement not to mention the gun: Theodore mentioned it the min-

ute he came in the room. But at that time I hadn't realized how genuinely Theodore thought he'd make a first-rate ambassador to one of the less Communist-tainted of the important countries of the world, and how much Mr. Stubblefield's campaign meant to him.

Sergeant Buck was coming up the marble stairs from the first floor as I came down them from the third. It took me an appreciable second to recognize him, because he had his hat off, which I don't ever remember having happened before. Anyway, I'd never viewed him from the present angle. He'd done a bang-up spit-and-polish job on himself. Every mud-colored hair was aligned beside its fellow, glossed and glued down over his bald spot with military precision or as flat as a Third Avenue saloonkeeper's. He was beside Captain Lamb, not two steps behind him as he always was with Colonel Primrose. That in itself should have told me something, but it didn't, and I went on down, feeling a little sorry for him, as one would for any fish out of water.

Captain Lamb went into the library. Sergeant Buck, seeing me, stopped at the door. For a moment he did look slightly bereft, a stone mason's concept of a gigantic shadow whose substance had stayed at home. I expected him to turn the color of tarnished brass that he always does when he has to speak to me, and half expected him to say it was up to me to clarify my skirts. But he did neither. The lantern-jawed face congealed, as did the viscid-gray eyes, like a fish not out of water but one of a week in the deep freeze.

He said, "The Colonel ain't going to think much of these shenanigans, ma'am. With him sick."

"I'm sorry," I said. It was me that was the color of tarnished brass, the fish out of familiar waters.

He moved aside so I could go in the library, and came in too and closed the door. If I'd had any idea he was impressed by Captain Lamb, or overwhelmed by the grandeur of the Hallet mansion, I'd already jettisoned it. He was there in loco Primrosensis. He and Lamb were co-equal and no nonsense.

"I don't think the Colonel's going to like this very much, Mrs. Latham," Captain Lamb said soberly. "You ought not to have done it, whatever it was you did. You're going to find yourself in real trouble, one of these days."

"It's entirely my fault, not Mrs. Latham's, Captain Lamb," Dorothy said. She looked cool and lovely and completely self-

possessed. I don't know how I looked, but I felt as if I'd got my face and hands dirty playing mud pies instead of going properly on to Sunday School. "If you gentlemen will sit down, I'm the one to do the explaining. Mrs. Latham went with me."

I don't remember ever having seen Sergeant Buck sitting down before. Always, he'd stood iron guard outside the door.

"This Betty Livingstone came here yesterday to a party. She called herself Bertha Taylor, Mrs. Lawrence Taylor. I'd never seen her until then, nor heard of her before. She didn't stay long, and when she left the maid found a note she'd left in the powder room, addressed to me. It asked me to come and see her—it was urgent. And she was leaving early this morning. She had something to tell me. It did sound urgent, but I was afraid to go alone. I asked Mrs. Latham to go with me, which she did very reluctantly."

She paused as if expecting Captain Lamb to ask several obvious questions, I suppose, but he waited silently.

"She'd given me the address of the boarding house and her room number, and it was I who opened the door when there was no answer when I knocked. I thought I'd gotten the wrong room, she looked so different, and I was too embarrassed to think of anything else until I got away a little. Then I realized that whoever it was, something was horribly wrong. That's why we went back and looked in again. We were going to call the police then—we hurried out to do it, but the drugstores were all closed. When we got back to Mrs. Latham's we called Sergeant Buck. He said he'd call you."

"He did call me," Captain Lamb said deliberately. "He didn't get me, because I was there already, or on my way there. This Kelly dame started to yell her head off and there was a patrol car just down the street. They got there fast. It was them contacted Headquarters, not Mrs. Kelly. She just thought she did. She was too pie-eyed to call anybody."

"She wasn't too pie-eyed to take down my license number," I said.

There was a brief glint in Captain Lamb's eye. "I expect she likes to keep tab on who visits who. Might be useful some day."

He turned back to Dorothy. "I suppose you've got that note, Mrs. Hallett."

"No, I haven't. I thought I had it, but when I went to get it this morning to show you it wasn't in my coat pocket. I must have dropped it somewhere."

"That's too bad," Captain Lamb said. I didn't quite like the way he said it. I'd been wondering, of course, if he was just going to take Dorothy's story as stated. I couldn't think of anything she'd mis-stated, but it was wonderful how she'd left out everything of any real importance. And of course the whole thing must be intensely puzzling to Captain Lamb, as stated. "Maybe you can remember more of the details?" he suggested mildly. "Why it was so urgent, for instance?"

Dorothy looked over at me. "I don't remember any particular details, do you? She said she was leaving early because the climate here wasn't healthy. I suppose that's why it seemed urgent—as if she knew she was in danger, of some kind."

Captain Lamb regarded her gravely for a moment. He turned to me. "Anything to add to that, Mrs. Latham?"

"I read it very hastily," I said. "There was something about the front door being open till 12.30, and it was after twelve then. That's why my dress was on the floor. We had to hurry to make it."

"I see."

The way he said it, it sounded as if he didn't see at all.

"I assure you, Captain Lamb, that we don't know anything about Betty Livingstone," Dorothy said earnestly. "We'd never heard of her, or of Bertha Taylor, until yesterday. It's a complete mystery to both of us."

I hadn't been looking at Sergeant Buck, but I was aware of him now getting to his feet briskly.

"It's like we figured, Captain," he said. "They don't have no information. This here's a waste of time."

I thought Captain Lamb looked a little surprised, but he got up too. Dorothy rose, covering up her relief very well. She started to put out her hand, and actually did have it extended. But it was directly mid-center to Captain Lamb's broad back, for that was precisely the moment that Theodore Hallet chose to enter, both feet square in the middle of the apple cart.

"You gentlemen represent the police, I understand." He came in in a mild flurry of nervous self-importance. "I'm delighted you're here, gentlemen. I hope my wife has told you the whole story. We have nothing to conceal. No stone must be left unturned. We must find the person who brought the gun here. I trust Mr. Stubblefield's people have given you a perfectly free hand in the matter, because

whether the woman is mad or not, we can't have her annoying us this way. I advised him to turn the matter over to the police as soon as I read this extraordinary note she wrote my wife. I telephoned Mr. Seymour at once about it. I——"

He stopped at last. Why in heaven's name he hadn't stopped long before, I've no idea. Of course he couldn't see Dorothy's face, at first, to catch the frantic warning she was trying to flash him from behind the iron curtain of the combined backs of Captain Lamb and Sergeant Buck. But he could have felt the atmosphere, at least he could if he hadn't been so concerned with himself and with his precious Mr. Stubblefield. I could imagine what Dorothy must have been feeling just then, as I can imagine how an architect must feel standing by while somebody picks up the foundations of a house he's built and gives the whole thing a heave-ho into the open sea. My admiration for her was never greater. She held her peace and stood quietly erect, as tranquil as a summer sky.

Captain Lamb spoke with deceptive calm. "You saw the note, Mr. Hallet?"

"Yes, indeed."

Theodore looked quickly at Dorothy.

"I'm sure my wife will excuse me for reading her correspondence, but it seemed very important to me to act at once. I didn't disturb you, because you'd gone to bed, dear."

"Do you mean you took the note out of my pocket, Theodore?" Dorothy asked quietly.

"No, dear—it fell out. When I hung your coat up. You put it on the chair. It was wet and I knew it would get wrinkled."

"I thought you'd gone to bed."

"I had, but I felt the list must be somewhere. I felt you couldn't have been as lax as you pretended. I knew you were tired, and——"

"The note, Mr. Hallet," Captain Lamb said. "Where is it now?"

"On my wife's desk. Would you like me to get it?"

"If you will, please."

Captain Lamb watched Theodore hurry out. He turned back to Dorothy.

"Let's begin again, now, Mrs. Hallet," he said patiently.

"The woman annoying Mr. Stubblefield? Are we talking about Enoch B. Stubblefield?"

He went on without waiting for an answer, apparently feeling the hardening resistance inside her.

"It's your duty to tell us all you know, Mrs. Hallet."

"It's not my duty to go beyond that, Captain Lamb," Dorothy said coolly. "It's not my duty to make inferences. I told you the woman was here yesterday. I didn't see her annoying Mr. Stubblefield, or anybody. She went up those steps and into that room, and left the same way after a very few moments. If Mr. Stubblefield was annoyed, that's his affair, and you can take it up with him. The incident of the gun is neither here nor there. It has nothing to do with Betty Livingstone whatsoever. My husband is making inferences that seem to me entirely unjustified."

Theodore was back, so concerned with himself that he wasn't listening. He had his glasses on and was reading the note again.

"I'm afraid any fingerprints—"

"You can let me take care of that, Mr. Hallet.—Is this the note?"

Dorothy looked at it and nodded. Captain Lamb folded it, put it in his pocket without reading it, and turned to me.

"I'd like you to come with me, Mrs. Latham," he said soberly. "Will you get your hat, or whatever you have to take home? I'm going to need you for a little while."

I looked at Dorothy. I still didn't look at Sergeant Buck. Dorothy made a move forward, but Captain Lamb stopped her. "If you don't mind staying here, Mrs. Hallet. I'd like a few more words with you."

I didn't know whether that meant all of us were going, or just Captain Lamb and me. I went out and upstairs to get my bag and the raincoat I'd worn the night before, pretty worried about the whole thing. Of course we should have warned Theodore. Even if he'd read the morning paper, which he probably hadn't taken time to do, knowing the police were in the house, he had no way of connecting the blonde Betty Livingstone with the gray-haired woman in black he thought was annoying his white hope for a new world.

12

When I came down Dorothy was sitting over beside the fireplace, looking down into it, a little pale, I thought, but self-possessed. Theodore had Captain Lamb buttonholed in the center of the rug, telling him everything.

"I'll count on you to clear anything that might boomerang into unfavorable publicity through my headquarters first, Captain," he was saying as I came in. "They're officially opened tomorrow morning at 1246 Connecticut Avenue. Or you can always contact me here."

I looked over at Dorothy. She had her eyes closed, with a kind of infinite hopelessness that was still, I thought, steadying itself for the shock that had to come when we left and Theodore had to face the facts of life. I hoped it wasn't too late to cancel his lease on 1246 Connecticut Avenue. So far as I could see, Mr. Stubblefield was going to have plenty of publicity without anybody having to open headquarters to dispense it.

She was still there when I went silently down the marble steps, with Captain Lamb on one side of me and Sergeant Buck on the other, both equally silent. The front door closed as I got into the back seat of the police car with Captain Lamb, the Sergeant climbing in front with the driver. We moved out of the drive and waited on the sidewalk for traffic to clear so we could cross over to the downtown side of Massachusetts Avenue. I suppose it was the sound of the front door bursting open again as we finally got across that made us all look back at once. Theodore Hallet was running out into the driveway, waving his hands and shouting at us, gesticulating frantically. It was like an old Keystone Comedy when somebody's on the wharf but the ferry's already in midstream.

"Keep right on going," Captain Lamb said blandly. "We don't see him and we don't hear him."

He seemed highly pleased, with himself and the whole business. He turned to me then, totally disregarding Theodore. "If Buck here thinks it would be okay with Colonel Primrose, Mrs. Latham, I'd like you to go over to this I Street place and have another look at that room. It's just the way it was except the body's gone. Frankly, I don't entirely trust our friend Mrs. Hallet."

I looked at the black square in front of me that was the back of Sergeant Phineas T. Buck. It was a clear case of instant rigor mortis.

"I'll be glad to go, Captain Lamb," I said.

I suspect he would have winked at me if he'd thought it would be okay with Colonel Primrose and Mrs. Lamb. The dour glint in his eye couldn't at any rate have been from the note he'd extracted from his pocket and was now reading, because certainly there was nothing amusing in it. He read it twice before he passed it up to Buck.

"What would you say this woman had in mind, now, Mrs. Latham?" he asked, when Buck had handed it back to him.

"I wouldn't say," I said. "I really have no idea."

We went the rest of the way to the house on I Street in complete silence, monumentally disapproving in front where Sergeant Buck was. The house looked very different in broad daylight with the sun shining on it. It wasn't as big or as ominous. It was a dull gray, with the Victorian woodwork gewgaws painted cobalt blue, peeling in spots. The yard was dry now except where the puddles were, and the child's buggy was still lying on its side, and not a blade of grass or weed, or even an ailanthus shoot, anywhere in the caked unlovely enclosure with its iron fence half fallen over.

A lot of ill-assorted people were hanging around next door and across the street, inching closer whenever the uniformed policeman on the sidewalk turned them back. The working press seemed to be all over the outside of the place, but I didn't see anybody I knew.

Captain Lamb got out of the car and waved his hand to them. "See you later, boys. Nothing new so far."

"Who's the dame?" somebody asked audibly. Sergeant Buck said, "You don't have to go in there, ma'am, if it's going to get you all upset."

"It isn't at all," I said. One thing was happily evident, and that was, it hadn't occurred to any one out there that I was the missing socialite. I couldn't, of course, have looked less like one.

We went in, picking our way over the holes made by the missing bricks in the walk, and up the steps. It didn't have any relation to the trek that Dorothy and I had taken ten hours earlier, or maybe it was just the solidly comforting phalanx with me that took all of the terror out of it now.

"There's a guy in here wants to see you, Captain," a young detective said as he came into the hall. "He thinks he's got some dope. He's coolin' his heels in Mamie's boo-dwar."

The greasy door at the right of the stairway was partly open, and I looked in. Sitting bolt upright on a couch with half a dozen sophisticated long-legged dolls (inanimate) among the rainbow assortment of rayon cushions, was no less than the Chief Assistant Executive of Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises. He seemed to me to be very greenish-gray and keeping a weather eye off to one side—where was obviously the shrill presence of Mrs. Mamie Kelly herself, yelling out the window, I took it, to the woman in the next house.

"Tell him to wait," Lamb said coolly. "And tell that woman to shut up. Come along, Mrs. Latham."

I followed him up the dirty steps, Sergeant Buck bringing up the rear.

"You came up this way," Lamb said.

"And to that door."

I pointed to Number 6. A policeman moved aside for us.

"I'd like you just to look in and tell me if anything's different."

He opened the door.

It was all different, with the light off and the sun pouring in through the windows. It looked cheaper and more barren and even less attractive. The bed was empty, the pillows still as they'd been except that the brilliant scarlet trail had turned dirty brown and the sheet that had covered the lower part of the body was stained now too. It didn't seem horrible, just terribly tawdry and terribly sad. I let my eyes move slowly over the rest of the room, to the dresser, the chair and the closet door.

"I thought you said the room hadn't been changed," I said. It seemed to me that if I didn't smell a rat, I could at any rate smell a possible trap he was trying to catch me in.

"What's different, Mrs. Latham?"

"The wig's gone—it was on the dresser with the scarf," I said. "And the black dress was on that chair, and her shoes on the floor."

"What wig?" Captain Lamb said. "And what black dress?"

"The ones she wore yesterday afternoon to the Halletts', when she called herself Bertha Taylor." Whether he was trying to trap me or not, that much of the truth was so bound to come out that it didn't

make any difference. "And that dress, the blue one, was hanging on a hanger hooked over the top of the closet door." I pointed to the print dress with white collar and cuffs in an untidy heap on the floor where it had fallen hanger and all.

"But I don't remember those," I went on. "I didn't look at the floor very carefully, I'm afraid."

I pointed again, this time to some small patches of white powder, like footsteps going to the closet door.

"We didn't go in any farther. We just stood right here."

Captain Lamb had his eyes fixed intently on my face, trying to decide, I suppose, how much of the truth there was in what I was telling him. I wouldn't have dared tell him anything else just then. He looked grim and businesslike.

"Was the closet door open or shut? Think carefully, Mrs. Latham."

"I don't have to think," I said. "It was closed. The hanger was hooked over it, with the dress on it. It must have fallen off when the door was opened."

Captain Lamb glanced over my head at Sergeant Buck. They seemed to have information that I didn't have.

"Those powder marks are where there were damp tracks from the closet to the door, Mrs. Latham. And the closet door was open when the patrol officers got here. And Mrs. Kelly was standing just where you are, screaming her head off. If that door was closed when you were here . . ."

My mouth had a funny metallic taste in it, and I swallowed once or twice to try to get rid of it.

"If you're sure the door was closed when you and Mrs. Hallet were here, you were both playing in fool's luck last night, Mrs. Latham. You can see for yourself."

He went into the room and drew the closet door a little farther open. There were powder marks on the floor in the closet too, quite a patch of them.

"Man or woman, whoever shot Betty Livingstone was still here when you were," Captain Lamb said. "Right here in this closet, not five feet from where you and Mrs. Hallet were standing in that door."

My mouth tasted still brassier, and I swallowed again.

"There was no wig here, and no black dress, and no shoes," he went on deliberately. "The room was exactly as you see it now."

Mamie Kelly was too scared to tell anything but the truth."

He reached down, picked the dress up and hung it back on the door. Then he got inside the closet and pulled the door shut as far as it would go with the hook over the top.

"I can see you plain as day, Mrs. Latham," he said from inside.

He pushed the door open. The dress dropped on the floor again where it had been.

"What I'm trying to tell you is that you and Mrs. Hallet had better come through with everything you know, and quick. You were lucky, last night. This is rough stuff, Mrs. Latham."

He paused to let that sink firmly into my torpid brain.

"I don't think either of you saw who was in this closet last night. If you had, neither of you would have been alive to tell about it."

He looked at me gravely.

"But murder's a queer thing, Mrs. Latham. A guilty conscience can't ever rest on anything for sure. If this was somebody who recognized you two women, he'll start worrying, see? He's going to start thinking, 'Well, maybe those two dames did see me. Maybe they were just being cagey and pretended they didn't see me so they'd get out whole. Maybe they looked through the keyhole before I got in the closet here.' You don't know how a person's mind is going to work, Mrs. Latham, with a load like that on it."

He let that sink in too, which it did much more quickly than he thought.

"What I'm saying to you is that you and Mrs. Hallet had better watch your step. You see?"

I nodded my head. I saw very well.

"Okay. Then what do you know about this Betty Livingstone? You don't have to tell me now. I'm going to send you home to think it over. I want you to call up Mrs. Hallet, and tell her what I showed you here, and what I said. I want you to put the fear of God in her, like I'm trying to put it in you. And I want to know what kind of a wig, and what kind of clothes? Understand?"

"It was a gray wig," I said. "It was dry and straggly. The dress was cheap black rayon with rain spots on it, and—"

"—Report for you, Captain." A detective came to the door and handed a teletype message in over my shoulder. Captain Lamb took it and read it.

He looked past me to Sergeant Buck. "You were right. She was

hired from her New York agency for a confidential job down here—theatrical agency. Her address was supposed to be the Preston Hotel. That's up by the Union Station. All right, Buck. Take Mrs. Latham home, and meet me up there at the Preston Hotel in half an hour if you can make it."

"I can go home by myself," I said.

"I'm taking you home, ma'am," Sergeant Buck said. I hope he didn't mean it to sound as grim as it did, but if you have to talk out of one side of your mouth as if you had paralysis in the other, no matter what you say it sounds as if you were saying, "Scram, lady—get the hell out of here before I land you one behind the ear." Actually, Sergeant Buck was being more than nice. He was watching his diction, I had a definite idea, and certainly being enormously articulate for him. He just can't help sounding like a top sergeant from the old Army when the Army didn't have to bother about everybody's mamma writing her congressman. At least I hoped that was it, and said, "Thank you, Sergeant," as if it was.

13

We went downstairs, Sergeant Buck two steps behind me. Captain Lamb was behind him. Mr. Ellery Seymour was in the doorway of Mrs. Kelly's room, waiting impatiently. He didn't look as gray-green as he had in my brief glimpse through the doorway.

He merely looked like a very busy man not in the habit of being kept waiting in or outside of a bood-war.

It occurred to me that perhaps Captain Lamb did not know who it was he was keeping waiting, and I was right.

"Do you know Mr. Ellery Seymour, Captain Lamb?" I asked.

"Oh, come in, Mr. Seymour." He edged past me and Sergeant Buck at the foot of the stairs and pushed Mrs. Kelly's door open to indicate what he meant by "in."

Ellery Seymour nodded to me, taking my presence there rather more for granted than seemed particularly flattering. As I'd expected to be hustled off home at once, I was surprised to find that Sergeant Buck and I were both staying, and also that we looked gray-green ourselves the minute we stepped into the orchid and chartreuse room that was Mrs. Kelly's. It was a wonderful place,

with a large picture of some tropical dive done in a mosaic of broken beer bottles, with a handsome orange moon rising through the palm trees behind it over the boarded-in fireplace. I caught only a brief view of the lady herself, her hair orange as the moon, before Captain Lamb ordered her to the rear of the house and closed the inside door to her dining room. She looked straight through me with no sign of recognition in her small bloodshot eyes.

"Sit down, Mr. Seymour; glad you came. I was going to get in touch with you. Think you can probably give us a little help."

I'd never seen the Chief of Homicide functioning without Colonel Primrose present until this morning. If he'd been a doctor he couldn't have had a more perfect bedside manner, deceptively grave and as smooth as sweet oil.

Ellery Seymour gave me a brief bleak smile.

"I dare say Mrs. Latham has already told you part of what I came to tell," he said. "I'm genuinely distressed about this business."

He looked it. He was outwardly as detached and unperturbed as ever, but he seemed to have some kind of inner disturbance, like a man who's overworked, and still carrying on but with a definite effort to keep from throwing the whole thing up and going for a long rest. I don't know that I would have recognized that, just seeing him then, but I'd seen him often enough before and never had that feeling about him. Subtle as the change in him was, it was still apparent.

"I tried to get in touch with you when I was here last night, or this morning, rather," he went on. "But you'd gone and the man at the front gate was making everybody move on, so I didn't have a chance to make myself very clear. It's about the woman this girl was impersonating yesterday. Bertha Taylor. Her name is Bertha Elizabeth Taylor and she has a daughter whose stage name is Betty Livingstone. I suppose of course that accounts for the resemblance that fooled all of us yesterday. I suppose Mrs. Latham has told you all that."

He glanced at me again.

"You knew about this girl, then?"

Captain Lamb spoke before I could say anything, and I suspect for that reason.

"I knew she existed, Captain," Seymour said. "I didn't know she was here. I thought it was her mother. The Stubblefields and I both

thought so. It isn't the first time Bertha Taylor has come out to . . . to *haunt* Mr. Stubblefield . . . though it's the first time it would ever have been done publicly. I blame myself for not realizing that yesterday."

"Why should she want to haunt Mr. Stubblefield, Mr. Seymour?" Captain Lamb asked patiently. "What's all the mystery?"

Ellery Seymour shook his head, not denying knowledge, I supposed, but because what he had to say was painful, something he'd have preferred not to go into.

"It's a pathetic business, Captain Lamb. Bertha Taylor's husband was an employee of ours. He was brilliant but extremely erratic. I thought he was worth keeping on for the brilliant periods, but Mr. Stubblefield, like a great many unfrustrated and emotionally highly integrated people, didn't think so. He felt Taylor had had his quota of chances and more, and he fired him. It happened that Taylor was just on the point of finishing an extraordinary piece of work on a dam we were building. He went out to it the next morning and blew his brains out. Mr. Stubblefield was very much upset about it. It took two years to finish the job instead of three months. However, he was persuaded to give Taylor's wife an annuity. Her mind was affected by the whole thing. That's why we've never called the police in when she made her previous appearances. We've felt very sorry for her."

Captain Lamb was silent for a moment. "I see," he said then. "And when did you find out that it wasn't Mrs. Taylor but her daughter?"

"When I read this morning's paper. I came here last night to see Bertha Taylor. Mr. Theodore Hallet phoned me around half-past two and read me a note he'd found in his wife's pocket. It gave this address. Mr. Hallet was upset by what happened yesterday. He's thinking of Mr. Stubblefield as Presidential timber, and there were newsmen around. He knew nothing of the background, of course—he just thought she was a crazy woman and we ought to notify the police. He'd said that earlier, but we told him we'd find her and send her home. When he came across her address he got me out of bed to tell me about it."

"You didn't know her address, any of you?"

"Oh, no, no. We expected she'd turn up at Mr. Stubblefield's hotel today. I was interested in preventing that, of course, for gen-

eral publicity reasons, so when Mr. Hallet called I came here at once to try to persuade her to go home quietly. I wasn't alarmed about anything. The people next door said it was a young woman. They didn't know her name. It wasn't until I saw the papers this morning that I realized what must have happened."

"You didn't call the Chief of Police in Livingstone, Montana, then, Mr. Seymour?" Captain Lamb inquired.

I was glad he wasn't looking my way at the moment.

Ellery Seymour looked at him. "Not the Chief of Police, no," he said. "I did call Mrs. Taylor this morning, when I saw the papers. I thought at first both of them might be here. She was there, however. And I didn't tell her what had happened. That's somebody else's job."

He was so obviously distressed that I was a little surprised. I'd never have thought of him as having that much human sympathy.

"I take it it was you got her the annuity. Would that be right, Mr. Seymour?" Captain Lamb asked.

Ellery Seymour shrugged. "Only in the sense that Mr. Stubblefield doesn't have as close connection with his employees as I do—or didn't at that time, at any rate. I brought it to his attention. He's a very busy man, Captain."

He got up. "If there's anything I can do, I'd like to do it," he said. "I'm sure Mr. Stubblefield will want to take care of any expenses there are. I think her mother would want her to come back to Livingstone."

He started for the door, and stopped.

"You say some one called the Chief of Police there last night?"

He looked as if he were just really hearing what had been said.

"Some one must have been interested, then. I wonder who it was?"

Captain Lamb looked casually at me.

"A man called. Said he was Charles Lamb. The Chief checked in the directory and found my name's Albert. He called me this morning. The call was put in from Hobart 6363. Who was it, Mrs. Latham?"

"Well, I'm afraid I've forgotten," I said. "Maybe I can remember later."

"You better remember right now, ma'am."

It was the first time Sergeant Buck had spoken. Ellery Seymour

looked around at him, as startled as he would have been if the Washington Monument had suddenly broken into pig Latin.

"It was Milton Minor," I said hastily. Sergeant Buck was standing just in front of the bottle mosaic, and I didn't want it broken over the top of my head. I imagined Mrs. Kelly was probably fond of it.

"Milton Minor?"

Mr. Seymour looked slightly surprised.

"Oh, well. I didn't know he knew about Bertha Taylor." He took his hat off the fringed Chinese embroidery cover of the piano by the door. "There's just one other thing, Captain."

He managed a faintly ironic smile.

"Would you mind calling off your man? I'll be at my hotel, or if I'm not I'm easily found, any time. It's a little awkward, being followed as I've been this morning."

He smiled again, and Captain Lamb grinned amiably.

"Sure. I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks."

Mr. Ellery Seymour went out.

Sergeant Buck looked inquiringly at the Captain. "You ain't got a tail on him?"

Captain Lamb shook his head. "I haven't. I'd better find out who has." He started toward the door and stopped. "Why don't I leave that to you, Buck, unofficially? Pick up what you can. I've got other things to think about."

He looked at me. "So it was my old friend Milton that called the Chief out there?"

"He was going to tell you this morning," I said. "I didn't want to blurt out his name in front of Mr. Seymour. Milton's only supposed to know what they tell him. I don't think they'll like his poking around in their private affairs."

"Too bad," Captain Lamb said unsympathetically. "I'll have a talk with Milton. They tell me he's a big shot in his racket now. He used to be a pain in the . . . in the neck when I knew him here."

"—In respect to the Preston Hotel where this Livingstone woman was supposed to be staying, you going up there now?"

I didn't know whether Sergeant Buck was taking great pains to keep his speech fit for female ears and hampered by the effort, or whether he always spoke that way. It sounded very formal.

Lamb nodded. "We'd better get on out there."

I didn't like the look in the fish-gray eyes fixed on me from in front of the moonlit mosaic.

"May I go too, Captain?" I said quickly, as he started outside to the hall.

"Sure. Come along."

Sergeant Buck's jaw tightened and the tarnished-brass color began to come out along it.

"The——"

"—Colonel wouldn't like it," I finished. "But the Colonel isn't here, so I think I'll go along if Captain Lamb says I may." I added, "And *don't* say that to me again."

"No offense meant, ma'am," Sergeant Buck said stiffly.

"And none taken, Sergeant."

But we didn't go then, which was perhaps unfortunate unless you're more of an extreme fatalist than I am.

The phone out on the wall in the lower hall was ringing when Sergeant Buck and I were going through our ritual, and I heard the officer who answered it calling Captain Lamb. He went out. The Sergeant and I stood at opposite ends of Mrs. Kelly's front room, the atmosphere thick with stale beer, staler powder and impasse. In a minute the Captain came back. He looked at us oddly.

"They've just picked up a woman trying to dump a .38 over the Memorial Bridge," he said. "She'd been walking around, acting funny. A traffic cop spotted her. Stick around a minute. I'll be back."

14

There are lots of guns in Washington . . . and lots of women who might want to dump them into the Potomac River, I kept telling myself over and over again. It couldn't be Dorothy Hallet. I kept telling myself that, knowing very well, however, that it could be and probably was. It seemed such a stupid thing to do. She ought to know it was such an obvious place for the police to be watching. Still, when I got down to it, the whole business of the gun had been far from bright, and at no point convincing at all. It was no more unreasonable for her to choose the wide open and at times quite empty bridge from the Lincoln Memorial to Arlington than it was to stick the gun under the first sofa cushion she came to, as

she'd done the night before. And of course it had always been nonsense to think that Milton Minor could have extracted it without my seeing him, sitting right there beside him as I was.

On the other hand, if Theodore Hallet was going to rummage through her things every time she turned her back, and run to the police like a cheerful spaniel retrieving a rubber ball, I didn't blame her for wanting to get it out of the house. The comforting note in it was that it wasn't the gun Captain Lamb thought it was. It couldn't be the gun that had killed Betty Livingstone. Dorothy Hallet was with me at the time. And if she had had the slightest sense of suspicion or guilt connected with it, of course she'd have thought more carefully about where to dump it.

Still, it was all very bewildering. Her reason for having the gun now, and for having it in the first place, was just as unconvincing as its antics of the day before. I moved away from the front window and sat down on the crocheted protector over the arm of one of Mrs. Kelly's rose mohair overstuffed chairs, and waited as patiently as I could. Sergeant Buck's granite corpus was immovable. Suddenly, above the general racket outside the house, I heard a child, I have no doubt the owner of the dilapidated doll buggy, begin to scream.

"Mama! Mama!"

The voice came from the yard next door, where the neighbors had largely congregated to call back and forth to Mamie Kelly.

"Mama! That's the lady, Mama! That's the lady that came yesterday to see *her*! Tell the p'liceman, Mama! That's that lady!"

I went to the side window. I could see the child, bouncing up and down, one hand on the fence rail, the other pointing to the front of the house we were in. I was aware of Sergeant Buck moving quickly to the street window behind me, but I didn't move. I was too stunned, I suppose. I hadn't, of course, really thought it could be Dorothy. And what the child said, if it meant anything, was really stunning. I hadn't believed Dorothy about the revolver, but I had believed her about never having seen Betty Livingstone and/or Bertha Taylor before. I didn't want now to have to believe she'd lied to me about that, with a lie that failed what she'd called her pragmatic test. And that she had, the high shrill voice of the child was proclaiming to the street, and to the nation's press via the reporters hanging around in the street, flanked by God knew how

many camera men clicking away like fiends from hell so far as I knew.

Then they were hurrying her in. I could hear somebody bellow to the kid to shut up, and hear footsteps scuffling over the bricks and up the steps and into the hall.

"—Where's the Captain?"

The door Captain Lamb had drawn partly to behind him burst open, and in they came. I looked up, and I stared, my mouth I suppose just sagging stupidly.

It wasn't Dorothy Hallet at all. It was Susan Kent. She was as appalled to see me as I was to see her . . . and I had the strange and instantaneous impression that she hadn't been afraid until that moment.

"—She's going to faint . . . get some water."

One of the men grabbed a chair and pushed her down into it.

But she hadn't fainted. "It's . . . just the heat," she said.

The officer who had brought her in took a small automatic out of his pocket and put it on Mamie Kelly's center table. "It's not that hot, sister," he said. "Not the weather, anyway."

Captain Lamb pushed him aside. He stood for a moment looking at Susan, and at the gun on the table.

"What's your name, Miss?" he said quietly.

"Susan Kent."

"Where do you live?"

"3900-A Massachusetts Avenue."

"—3900-A?" Captain Lamb asked, very quietly. His eyes rested intently on her. "That's on the Theodore Hallet place?"

"Yes. We live in the stables."

"Your husband's name?"

"It . . . it doesn't matter," Susan Kent said. "I don't want him brought into this. He hasn't anything to do with it."

She hadn't looked up, and didn't now. She sat with her hands folded in her lap, drawn into the tense, tightly closed orbit of her own self, very pale but controlling herself with amazing courage. I didn't know whether to be proud of her or appalled.

"She wouldn't give us her name," the officer who'd brought her in said. "She—"

"All right," Captain Lamb said. He nodded toward the door. The man got out. Lamb pushed the door shut behind him.

"Why didn't you give your name?"

"I didn't want anybody to know who I was. I . . . I didn't know Mrs. Latham was going to be here. . . ."

Lamb gave me a brief and I thought slightly sardonic glance. He looked back at Susan.

"What were you doing with this gun, Mrs. Kent?"

"I was trying to throw it in the river, where nobody would find it. I didn't know the man following me was a detective."

"Why did you want to do that?"

"Because I didn't want it around the house."

I looked at it quickly. It looked like Dorothy's gun, but of course they all look alike to me if they're generally the same type. I wished like mad the girl would raise her eyes so I could warn her not to say too much.

Captain Lamb nodded gravely, his eyes still intent. "We happen to be hunting a gun of this caliber," he said quietly.

He picked it up, looking at it curiously, opened it and raised it to his nose. Then he handed it over to Sergeant Buck. He looked at it too. Neither of them had any expression of any kind in his face. Buck handed it back. Captain Lamb went to the door with it and went out. He was back in a moment, without the gun, and outside I heard a car start up and drive off.

"Now then, Mrs. Kent," Lamb said. "That gun is yours?"

Susan shook her head without speaking.

"Well, what's the story about it then?"

"I found it."

"All right. Where did you find it?"

Lamb was as patient as if the Preston Hotel where Betty Livingstone was supposed to have been staying didn't exist.

Susan hesitated, for not more than an instant, and for the first time.

"It was in the front hall of our place this morning when I went out to bring in the milk and get the paper. It was just lying there, on the floor."

He looked at her a little oddly. "How did it—who put it there?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea at all."

"Did your husband?"

"I . . . I didn't tell him."

It was Captain Lamb who shook his head this time, looking at her very soberly.

"When did you decide to throw it in the river?"

"As soon as I saw it. I decided to throw it somewhere. The river seemed the best place."

"Why?"

"Because it's deepest."

"I mean why did you decide to get rid of it?"

"I told you. Because I didn't want it around the house."

"Why didn't you? Why were you afraid to have it there?"

"Because."

"That's not a very good reason, Mrs. Kent, is it? Was it because you saw the morning papers?"

She looked up then quickly. Her dark pupils, dilated from being shaded by her lids, contracted so rapidly in the sudden light that it gave her the most extraordinarily startled expression.

"I didn't read the paper. I had to get breakfast for my husband. We don't have a morning maid. Anyway, I was too upset seeing the gun there. I wasn't thinking about anything else."

"Why should you have been upset, Mrs. Kent? It seems to me the natural thing to do was call your husband. That's what my wife would have done."

"You know why I didn't."

Susan Kent shot me a hot resentful glance. Her lips tightened.

"She's told you why. I'm not going to be trapped again." Two bright spots burned on her cheekbones. "She's—"

"She hadn't told me anything, Mrs. Kent. I think you'd better. Seems to me you've got a lot on your mind you'd better tell me, young lady."

She sat there tight-lipped. He waited for a moment, then went out into the hall again. When he came back he had the child I'd seen out by the fence yelling. Her face had been hastily washed and her hair given a lick and a promise, pulled tight by a red ribbon in a short brush at the nape of her not too clean small neck. Her brown eyes were wide, but they knew too much, and there was neither hesitation nor embarrassment in the pert bright little face.

"Do you know this lady, honey?"

Captain Lamb sounded like the father of ten and grandfather

of all the world. But he needn't have been so paternal. Honey knew far more for her age than any of the rest of us did for ours.

"Yes, sir. She's the lady came here yes'day after school lookin' for *her*."

"Looking for who?"

"*Her*. You know. The one they bumped off upstairs last night. The one that's in all the newspapers. She's the only one we got. Mamma's takin' it easy 'cause Bert's got a job and payin' us alla-money." Her face brightened. "But *I* didn't let her in. She looked like a soshulurker, an' Mamma don't like them stickin' their dirty noses in our business."

Susan Kent looked less like a social worker than anybody I've ever seen as she stared, her wide blue-gray eyes blankly on the bright-faced child. Her dark hair was a mass of curls tightened in small corkscrews by the humidity, no color on her face except the bright artificial red outlining her full lips. She looked from the child to Captain Lamb and back again.

"What are you saying? What is it you're talking about?"

Her face changed suddenly then. Her lips parted, her breath came quickly. She looked away from the child, her glance moving quickly over the room, out the window to the street.

"—Except she didn't say Betty Livingstone."

The child, aware of her sudden advantage, pressed it like a small triumphant fiend.

"She said somethin' else. But a lotta people take other names. On the stage they do all the time."

Susan Kent had slumped a little in her chair, not much but just a little.

"Is . . . this that place?" she asked slowly. The life seemed to have drained out of her voice. "I . . . I didn't notice where they were bringing me. I thought it was going to be the police station. I . . . didn't see it, coming in. Is this . . . is this where Bertha Taylor was?"

She moistened her lips, looking up at Captain Lamb.

"What is it? What's the matter? Is . . . has something happened to her? Oh, *tell* me—don't just stand there! What's happened? What is it? Bertha Taylor *can't* be dead!"

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"Her name wasn't Bertha Taylor, it was Betty Livingstone, Mrs. Kent," Captain Lamb said calmly. "And she is dead."

"They bump—"

Captain Lamb yanked the small product of her mother's boarding house, the radio and the moving pictures out of the room before she got any further in her gleeful rendering of what to her was just another exciting incident moved from the comic strips to the front page and her own immediate world. He came back into the room and shut the door, perspiring a little, not at all like Dick Tracy and no doubt greatly disappointing to the young of the neighborhood hanging around the outside edge of the scene.

"She was masquerading as Bertha Taylor," he continued. I thought "masquerading" seemed a rather macabre term for it just then. "She was shot and killed—murdered, Mrs. Kent—in her room here in this house, some time close after midnight. Where were you at the time?"

Susan Kent was still staring blankly at him. "I . . . was home in bed."

"Where was your husband?"

Her face showed a kind of stupid horror. "My . . . *husband?*"

"Was he in bed too?"

She sat up sharply erect, her cheeks coloring angrily.

"Don't be absolutely crazy! My husband never heard of Bertha Taylor. He never *saw* the gun. He hasn't any—"

"All I asked was if he was home in bed, Mrs. Kent. Was he? Or wasn't he?"

There was something rather terrible about her then, the way she looked blindly about her, not meeting anybody's eyes, as though really trapped, so seriously trapped that she didn't dare not tell the truth.

"No. He wasn't. He'd gone back to his laboratory. He didn't come in until . . ."

"Until when, Mrs. Kent?"

"I don't know. I don't know! Around three, I think. But I don't know! He was working, at his laboratory!"

"Just take it easy," Captain Lamb said. "It's easy to check. There's no use your getting all upset, if you're telling the truth."

But she was upset, terribly.

"You and your husband hadn't had a quarrel, had you, Mrs. Kent? Would that be why he wasn't home?"

Susan sat back in her chair again, wearily, and closed her eyes for a moment. "No," she said, at last. "It wasn't a quarrel. He never quarrels. He just went out. But it hadn't anything to do with Bertha Taylor. He doesn't *know* Bertha Taylor. Can't you understand what I'm trying to tell you? He never laid his eyes on Bertha Taylor. Or the gun. Or anything."

"The gun wasn't in the hall at three o'clock this morning, then, or when he came home, Mrs. Kent?"

"I don't know. It couldn't have been. He'd have seen it if it was."

I thought it was beginning to be a kind of third degree that couldn't go on any longer. Susan Kent was in such terror that she plainly didn't know what she was saying. She was trembling from head to foot and clutching her hands desperately together. It looked to me like a mild case of actual shock.

"I think Mrs. Kent ought to have a lawyer, if you're going to ask her any more questions, Captain Lamb," I said warmly.

"Oh, no! I don't want a lawyer! I'm telling you the truth. I don't *need* a lawyer—I just want to tell the truth and go home!"

She was struggling up out of her chair, a pathetic little figure as near collapse as she could be and still control the movement of her slim body. Captain Lamb watched her, not unkindly but detached and without personal sympathy of any kind.

"That's all I want, Mrs. Kent. You tell the truth, and the whole truth, and you can go on home. But I don't think you're telling me the whole truth. You must see how this story of yours sounds. People don't just find guns lying on their floor and then run and try to fling 'em in the Potomac."

"But that's really just . . . just the way everything was."

Captain Lamb nodded politely. "All right. You go on home, Mrs. Kent. One of the boys'll drop you at your front door. And you stay right there, hear? Don't go running away anywhere, because he'll stick around and go with you any place you go."

"I . . . won't," Susan said. She was holding on to the back of the

chair to steady herself. "But . . . please don't bring my husband into this. He doesn't—"

"You've told me that. You'll have more chance to prove it if you want to. You'll have to be franker than you have been, Mrs. Kent. You can go now."

I'd have liked to go with her, but I knew before Captain Lamb looked at me there wasn't a prayer. She went out with him.

"—You hadn't ought to have been so hard on the little lady," Sergeant Buck said suddenly, when Lamb came back.

He turned his head and spat very precisely into where the fireplace should have been. It was just a piece of board now, with wallpaper pasted on it, but the roses looked pretty spotted so I guess they were used to it.

"I wouldn't of done it, if I was you."

I wished he hadn't said it. Captain Lamb looks mild and fatherly but inside he's tough. And I knew he knew that inside Buck's concrete exterior, fortified and iron-girt, he's nothing but a quivering mass of sentimental jelly when anybody with blue eyes and curly hair and in her early twenties is concerned, in spite of well-known statistics on juvenile crime. And as, in Colonel Primrose's view at any rate, his feeling for some one like that has the slightest possible connection with their innocence, for him to feel sorry now for Susan Kent was practically the grand jury handing her over for trial.

"Are we going to the Preston Hotel?" I asked, to try to shift the emphasis, knowing nothing about the Preston Hotel except that the Sergeant appeared to think they ought to go there.

"I'm waiting for a report on that gun," Captain Lamb said. "They won't be long."

He went out into the hall.

"It really is too bad," I said. "I hope they don't have to drag her husband in. He's a nice guy."

Sergeant Buck spat again. That being an unsuccessful conversational gambit, I tried another.

"It's too bad Colonel Primrose has the measles."

He gave me a dour glare. "Maybe you'd ought to go home and call him up on the telephone, ma'am."

"Instead of hanging around where I'm not wanted, you mean, Sergeant?" I inquired agreeably.

He turned that odd tarnished-brass color again, but he didn't spit, I imagine because he'd spotted the wall-paper roses, I mean figuratively this time, and had not yet spotted the cuspidor across the room by the couch.

Captain Lamb jerked the door open and came in, his face showing an odd mixture of triumph and perplexity.

"Well, here we are," he said. He looked down at the report in his hand. "The gun Mrs. Kent was trying to toss in the River is the gun that shot that woman upstairs here. There were two shells left in it. No doubt at all, didn't take 'em a minute to check. I'm afraid the little lady's going to have to kick through with more than she's given us so far."

He looked at me. I'd sat down on the crochet-covered arm of the club chair again.

"You'd better start talking too, Mrs. Latham," he said. "This story about the gun, now, that you and Mrs. Hallet tried to hold out. What's the whole story on that?"

I shook my head. "I don't know, Captain. I haven't the faintest idea that this is the gun Mr. Hallet was talking about, and neither have you. I just don't know anything about it, at all."

He looked at me without irritation, or visible irritation anyway.

"You attorney for the defense, Mrs. Latham? Okay, if that's the way you want to play it. It would be a help if you'd play it different. As a matter of fact, lady, have you figured out who you're the defense for? You want you and Mrs. Hallet to wake up with your skull knocked in some morning?"

As a matter of fact, I wondered, who was it I thought I was defending. I tried to figure it out as we left the house. Captain Lamb stopped and talked briefly to a group of reporters who came down on him at the gate like locusts. I sat in back and Sergeant Buck took his rigid place by the driver. And I couldn't say, even to myself, who it was I thought I was blocking for. Dorothy Hallet in part, of course; it was her gun, or there was a gun involved in the picture somewhere that was hers, and she was my friend. Milton Minor, perhaps. It was possible for him to have taken it, though hardly conceivable he'd have used it the way it apparently had been used. Then there were the two Kents, Bill and Susan.

That was something else again, and it was Bill Kent rather than

Susan who was important. It seemed to me imperative to keep Bill, as far as I could, from any shattering illusion. Failing that, I had to keep as much faith as I could with Susan Kent. It wasn't her fault she'd come to me in the first place and told the story she did. At the same time, I didn't personally want to get knocked in the head, nor did I want Dorothy Hallet to . . . though already it seemed a long time ago, instead of a very short time ago, that I'd stood there in the doorway of Number 6 with a metallic taste in my mouth, being told the danger Dorothy and I could be in.

The driver left the big car to go over to where Captain Lamb was for a moment. I saw one side of Sergeant Buck's jaw move, the other stationary as if paralyzed, and the brassy voice, pitched low for him, said, "You don't need to worry none about the little Kent lady shootin' the Livingstone woman, ma'am. She couldn'ta done it. She wasn't shot in bed, she was put over there. They got the lead outa the wall. She couldn't of lifted her neither. Keep quiet about it, but you don't need to worry ma'am."

I said, "Thank you, Sergeant." It didn't seem to matter, really, that that wasn't what was worrying me. I was grateful for what seemed to me a surprising mark of confidence from one who'd regarded me as a plain sieve, always to be viewed with the jaundiced and bilious eye of mistrust. But it had never seriously entered my mind that Susan had shot Betty Livingstone, puzzling as it was that she'd known her and had actually been at this house. It wouldn't make sense. I wondered again, then, about her saying she didn't know whether she was going to shoot Mr. Stubblefield or not. I wished now I hadn't been so abrupt and had been a little more patient, and found out what she thought she meant, what she had been really trying to say when she said it. It seemed very involved and bewildering, and I doubted, with her violent resentment toward me, that I'd ever get a chance to have her clear it up.

"You might tip her off some—so she don't need to act so scared," Sergeant Buck said.

What was it I'd thanked him for? It didn't matter, and the record was set straight again. It was Susan Kent he didn't want to worry—not me. No matter where Colonel Primrose was, Sergeant Buck was still on the side of the angels. He was still the same malleable old putty in the hands of a blue-eyed damsel in distress.

"Okay," I said. But when Captain Lamb finally came and we started up toward the Hill I said, "I guess maybe I'd better tell you about the gun."

So I told him. I didn't tell him it was Dorothy Hallet's, or that Ellery Seymour had got it for her. I didn't tell him that Milton Minor had seen Susan Kent pick it up off the floor and move across to behind the library door with it aimed at the broad rear exposure of the One-Man Assembly Line . . . assuming Milton really had seen her and wasn't creating some spur-of-the-moment fictional biography. I glossed that part over, using Susan's version of the story and Mr. Stubblefield's acceptance of it, and then told him the rest as literally as I could—even the part about Mr. Joe Kramer's pretending to unload the gun, and Dorothy's taking it later, and hiding it under the cushion of the love seat Milton Minor and I were sitting on.

Captain Lamb listened in silence, looking at me a little oddly.

"So Kramer thought she was getting ready to let the Big Boss have it, did he?" he said when I'd finished. "And you're sure he didn't unload the gun when he pretended to?"

"I'm not sure of anything I didn't see myself," I said. "Mrs. Hallet told me that. I don't see she'd have any reason not to tell the truth about it. She wasn't called on to mention it at all, to me."

"Queer, though, wasn't it?"

I suppose I have the all-time low in batting averages on figuring the correct time to open my mouth and the correct time to keep it shut. What I managed to do by opening it at this point was cut myself out of the trip to the Preston Hotel. Unless, of course, Lamb was being cagier than I'd thought and never actually intended to let me go in the first place, but on the other hand was just leading me on till I told him what he wanted to know before he jettisoned me. Which is what he now promptly did—on the corner of Seventh and D, in front of the Court House.

"You can get a taxi here, Mrs. Latham," he said, not unkindly. "I've changed my mind. We're putting the cart before the horse. I'll look into a couple of things. You go on home like I told you."

He did whistle down a taxi for me, which was nice of him, and gave the driver my address on P Street. He didn't know, I supposed, about the guarded left-handed order I had from the Sergeant to give Susan Kent a hint . . . which was all the excuse I needed

to go back up to Massachusetts Avenue instead of to Georgetown and P Street.

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I got out at the Hallets' entrance, but I didn't go into their house. I hurried around the flagstoned path to the redecorated stables, forgetting until I got to the door that the place was permanently under observation by one of Lamb's men. I didn't, however, see him around anywhere, and there'd been no one out in the street that I recalled. The door was standing open and the screen unhooked. I rang the bell, and then I went on into the hall.

I called "Susan!" and waited a moment without any answer, so I called again. This time I thought I heard some one in the living room. I went over and pushed the door open. "Susan?" I said. But it wasn't. It was Bill Kent. He was sitting in the big wing chair by the side of the fireplace. The coal grate, that might be supplementary heating except that in the winter the place would freeze without it, was half full of cigarette stubs and two empty twisted packs. Unless Susan was a rotten housekeeper, Bill Kent's morning was fairly written out even before I had more than a first look at his face.

"Why, Bill . . . what on earth!"

I couldn't help exclaiming it. He looked awful, his eyes dark and smouldering and unhappy, staring at the door and waiting, not for me or any stranger but for Susan herself to come in. He made a jerky forward motion and got to his feet.

"She isn't here," he said curtly. "I'm just hanging around—a man's supposed to come fix the hot-water heater. What's wrong with that? Can't a man sit in his own living room?"

"Well, surely," I said. "I'm sorry. I thought you looked sick or something. I guess it was the light."

But it wasn't. He looked worse now there was more of it, with his face out of the shadow of the wing-back chair. He was a totally different person from the casual pleasant young man who'd come up to me and Milton Minor on the Hallets' balcony the evening before. The easy half-humorous amiability he'd had then was entirely gone. What was here now was tough bedrock, implacable, in its way as ruthless as the cold light that was behind Enoch B.

Stubblefield's genial kindness when the kindness slipped for a moment. His mouth was hard and his jaw was harder. I could see what Susan Kent meant. Seeing it, I wondered what ever could have made her think she could go on fooling him for very long. She must have seen this side of him from time to time. I suppose because she'd never seen it directed at her, she'd thought it never could be, when she first began.

"Sorry, I'll have to shove," he said shortly. "I've wasted too much time already."

"Don't go on my account," I said. "I'm leaving right away. Unless you'd like me to wait for the heater man."

"It doesn't make any difference. Suit yourself."

He went across the room to a table by the leaded glass casement windows at the side of the house. It was a reproduction Phyffe job with a lyre pedestal and a top that was opened up, with a sewing basket and some papers in it. He put it down, lifted up a lamp that normally stood there and was on the floor now, and put it back where it belonged.

"If Susan comes before you go, will you tell her I won't be home for dinner? I'll be here later. Tell her I'd like her to stick around till I get home, will you?"

I nodded. His voice was like the rest of him. When he went implacable it was no half-way journey. He went to the desk against the wall by the chimney breast, took a red paper letter file tied with a black string, stuck it into his brief case and snapped the brief case shut. He bent down then. It was the first time I'd noticed the battered gladstone bag on the floor by the desk. He was leaving. It was what Susan had said he'd do. She'd said, however, that he'd leave without saying anything, and my impression of him sitting as he'd been when I came in, with his somber smoldering gaze on the door, was that he'd intended saying plenty before he left this time. Which was fine, of course. What wasn't fine was for him to go out now and hole in somewhere with Captain Lamb on his trail. It would give Susan a lot more to explain, when she already had enough.

"Bill." I said.

"Yeah?"

"Why don't you leave that, and pick it up tonight? It would be a lot better all around."

For a moment I thought I'd made him actively sore. I didn't much like the look in his eye. You don't think of research scientists being particularly violent or hot-tempered, but this one was. Then the incandescent points went dull again as quickly as they'd burned up. He put the suitcase in the middle of the floor, and picked up his hat off the chair.

"Sorry," he said curtly. "May I ask what the hell business it is of yours, Mrs. Latham?"

"None at all," I said. "It's just a bit of highly gratuitous advice that you can take or leave. No obligation of any kind. It's in the interest of the scientific spirit, is all. Aren't you supposed to examine all the controlling factors before you proceed with any action?"

"I have examined all the controlling factors I need, thanks, Mrs. Latham," he said more calmly. "Also I'm the kind of guy that knows how to ask for advice when he needs it. But thanks, just the same."

He picked up the bag again. It sagged heavily. I had the uncomfortable idea, for an instant, that it was only books and it was me that had ignored the controlling factors, not him. But then I saw a couple of inches of white-fringed pajama tape sticking out.

"Leave that bag here, Bill," I said deliberately. I was still in front of the door and I stayed there. "As a personal favor to me, if for nothing else. Don't take it now."

"One side, please, Mrs. Latham," he said evenly. "I'd hate to knock a lady down in my own house. Or is it?"

I thought I'd better move then, so I did.

"Sure it's your house," I said. "And if you want to be a crazy hot-headed fool it's your privilege. Sorry I ever brought it up, any of it."

"It's quite all right."

He pulled the door open wider and went out into the hall.

"So long."

With that he crossed the small foyer and went out, his bag in one hand, his bulging brief case in the other. I watched him go down the flagstoned path, hoping against hope he'd cool off and maybe come back. But he didn't. He went deliberately but directly, without so much as a backward glance to indicate he had even a glimmer of hesitation or doubt about the logic and rightness of what he was doing.

I had a sharp twinge of doubt about my own logic, however.

But, as I say, my batting average being so painfully what it is, this was, in addition to that, one of those situations where any attempted explanation for the advice I was trying to give him didn't have the chance of the proverbial snowball on the steps of Capitol Hill, or is it an egg somebody fries there every summer? I heard a taxi door slam and the motor race up again, and then silence.

I turned back into the living room. The last cigarette he'd dropped when I came in was smoldering to a long gray cylinder of ash on the stone floor. I went over and flicked what was left of it into the grate with the side of my foot, and sat down, where he'd been sitting. I looked at my watch. It was disturbing about Susan. She ought to have been home long ago. She'd had more than plenty of time. And then, quite abruptly, I became alarmed. It might easily be that Captain Lamb had had no intention of sending her home when he followed her outside into the hall of Mamie Kelly's house on I Street. Or it might be he'd stopped her half-way out when he got the information about the gun, and ordered the police car to take her back to the District jail. After all, I thought, when the gun she'd tried to throw away, and for which she had such a highly improbable explanation to say the least, turned out to be the weapon with which the blonde woman there had been killed . . .

I got up, went over to the front windows and looked out at the Hallet house. It was a question of whether it would be better to let Theodore call his lawyer and get her some counsel, or for me to call mine, who's a dry stuffy old relic I inherited from my father's law office along with the house on P Street, and who'd be about as sympathetic as an old cat with a young robin fallen out of the parent nest. Or perhaps, I thought, it might be a good thing to let her stay until they got hold of Bill and she was scared enough to explain to him, as well as the District Attorney.

Finally I made up my mind, and I went over to the desk and called the Hallet's house. In spite of everything, I knew Theodore Hallet was either a kind man or a man who loves to help people because it inflates his ego. I didn't know which it was, but I did know he does like to be called on. So I called on him now. But he wasn't in. Neither was Mrs. Hallet.

"Mr. Hallet, he went over to Mr. Mollinson's," Adams said. "They say Mr. Mollinson's tolerably poorly this mornin'."

I put down the telephone, hesitating. I hesitated because I thought it would revive Freddie Mollinson enormously to hear that Susan Kent was now in jail. He'd regard it as poetic justice and on a high and deserving plane. Nevertheless, I thought I'd better risk it, and I'd dialed half his number when I heard a car come in the drive and the door slam, and footsteps on the flagstones. I put the phone down quickly, with a great sense of relief that it wasn't five minutes later and I'd put Theodore into legal operation.

And she wasn't alone. The woman's quick step on the flags had a heavier, slower, man's step along with it. I went back to the chair, sat down and looked at the door much the way Bill Kent had sat there and looked—except that there was nothing implacable about me—waiting for Susan to appear. And with the same result too. It wasn't Susan and her detective who came. It was, to my great surprise, the wife of Enoch B. Stubblefield, and Milton Minor, his gifted biographer. They were waiting at the door when I got up and went out in answer to the bell sounding off somewhere in the back of the house. They wanted Susan too. Or Mrs. Stubblefield did. I gathered that Milton only came for the ride.

"She isn't here," I said. "I'm just waiting for the man to fix the water heater."

I said it as Bill had said it, because some explanation seemed to be called for.

Mrs. Stubblefield said, "Oh, dear." Then she said, "In that case may I come in and rest a minute?"

She didn't look tired to me. She was as bright and chipper as a little sharp bird. The only thing that led me to believe she knew what had happened was that Milton Minor didn't look chipper at all. He looked pale around the gills and the toothbrush mustache, his native and acquired brass greatly diminished. Of course he was handicapped here, I remembered, not having the support of previous and supernatural knowledge coming from the stars that Mrs. Stubblefield relied on. He was trying to tell me something over her head, but I couldn't understand what it was.

"There's no reason for you to wait, Milton," Mrs. Stubblefield said. "Thank you for coming out. I'd like to talk to Mrs. Latham a moment."

I gathered then that what Milton wanted was to stay. But it

was too late. Mrs. Stubblefield was almost peremptorily brisk in her dismissal. He shrugged and gave up.

"All right," he said. "—Are you staying here?"

I shook my head.

"Charles Albert's looking for you," I said. "He wants to talk."

"The young sheep?"

I nodded.

"Okay," he said. "I'll see you later."

"I suppose he means Captain Albert Lamb," Mrs. Stubblefield said, as we went in to Susan's living room. "That's clever, isn't it?"

It was cleverer of her than of Milton Minor, I thought.

"He called my husband just before I left," she went on. "I'm sure I don't know why. Mr. Stubblefield knows nothing about this unfortunate thing. Why on earth should he?"

"I don't know," I said, because she had her bright little bird's eyes hopping all over the place and then on me as she finished, waiting for an answer. "Will you sit down?" I went back to Bill's chair.

"You shouldn't smoke so much," Mrs. Stubblefield said.

She glanced from the mess in the ashtray to the mess in the grate.

"Smoke disorders the atmospheric control. Your aura was a lovely blue last night. Now it's yellow. It's very yellow."

"That's the jaundiced view I'm taking of life at the moment," I said.

She ignored that. "*Where* is Mrs. Kent?" she asked abruptly.

I shook my head. "I have no idea. Why?"

"Because my husband sent his man out here to find her this morning, and her husband acted very badly. Joe Kramer has orders not to make trouble that will get in the papers, but I think he should have defended himself. I dare say it was all too sudden and unexpected."

"Joe Kramer?"

"Not that I like Joe particularly," Mrs. Stubblefield said. "I don't. I've tried to get my husband to discharge him. He gambles, and I don't trust gamblers who make money. I think he dresses too well, and lives too well, but my husband thinks I'm old-fashioned."

She stopped abruptly. "Mrs. Latham . . ." she said.

I wondered again where I'd ever got my original idea that Mrs.

Enoch B. Stubblefield was meek and colorless. She might be deluded by the stars and her Madame Tivoli or whoever, but she was a vital little woman, shrewd in her way and very determined.

"—Mrs. Latham . . . is Ellery Seymour in love with Mrs. Hallet?"

I can't think offhand of any question I expected less at the moment. It seemed so totally irrelevant.

"I've no idea, Mrs. Stubblefield," I said. "Absolutely none."

"There's something the matter with him that might explain it," she went on. "I've been trying for years to get him to marry some nice woman and settle down. My husband thinks the same way. Then tell me this, Mrs. Latham. Do the young Kents get along well together?"

She didn't stop to draw a breath between the one tangent and the other.

"I know very little about anybody's private life, Mrs. Stubblefield," I said patiently. "I assume the Kents get on very nicely, from the little I've seen of them."

"Then who shot the Livingstone girl, Mrs. Latham?"

I was used to it by this time. Her sudden skylarking off into a new direction didn't bother me.

"I don't know that either," I said. "I'm sorry I don't seem to be able to answer any of your questions."

"Do you know who I think did it?"

She lowered her voice, glancing around the room as if she thought somebody might be hidden there under the corner of the rug.

"I think it was somebody close to my husband, who thought they were doing him a service. Because you know it upsets him very much, having Bertha Taylor following him around."

"But it wasn't Bertha Taylor," I said weakly.

"No, but it was the same thing. It was Bertha Taylor's daughter. They've persecuted my husband for years, the whole family." Her voice and manner couldn't have been calmer. "I was opposed to him helping the woman, after her husband got drunk and killed himself and cost us a great deal of time and money—because time *is* money, the way my husband works. It was Ellery Seymour whose advice he took, not mine. Ellery is certainly living to rue the day. I'm not saying he had anything to do with this terrible thing. But . . ."

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"But . . . what, Mrs. Stubblefield?" I asked.

She smoothed down the pleat of her gray print dress and brushed a little non-existent fluff from it before she raised her eyes to mine. They looked curiously cold to me just then, cold and rather calculating, as if she were wondering about me as I was most definitely beginning to wonder about her.

"Well, since you ask me that, Mrs. Latham, I'll tell you," she said deliberately. "Why did he take Joe Kramer with him when he went out last night? He knows Kramer is supposed to stay in the room next to my husband from the time he goes to bed until the time he wakes up. But Joe Kramer wasn't there last night. I make a habit of checking on things concerning my husband, and he wasn't there. Now where was he, do you suppose?"

"At what time?"

Mrs. Stubblefield considered for a moment.

"We left here shortly after you did, and went back to the hotel and to bed. My husband was tired. I looked in Joe's room about midnight, I guess it was. He didn't get back until after three. I saw him come in when Ellery Seymour came. They were in the same elevator. And that's something else I don't understand. Joe Kramer lied about it when I asked him. He said he'd gone downstairs because he'd run out of cigarettes, and met Ellery in the elevator coming up. He denied he'd been out earlier, and I let it go at that.—I'm having him investigated this morning, without telling my husband anything about it."

"—*Why are you telling me?*" I thought. I couldn't think of any reason in the world that would hold water.

"I wonder *why* this young Mr. Kent laid into Joe Kramer this morning?" she said. "I wonder if there's any connection between any of this. I don't think Joe Kramer would hesitate to use violence himself, and that's—"

"But I thought you said it was somebody close to your husband, who thought he was doing him a service because he's been persecuted?"

She was pleating her dress again.

"I think Joe Kramer would take orders if he got them."

I was beginning at this point, I thought, to see some vague light.

"Don't you like Ellery Seymour, Mrs. Stubblefield?"

"He's devoted to my husband's interests, because they happen to be his own," she said calmly. "I like him for that. I don't care for him personally. I like men who live ordinary lives and don't sit up all night doing work they could do in the daytime just as well. I like a man to be a good mixer like my husband. I don't like these quiet men. You never know what they're thinking. I like a man who looks well fed."

Somebody had said that a long time ago, I seemed to remember, and it was a Cæsar, not a Cæsar's wife. "Let me have men about me that are fat; Sleek-headed men and such as sleep o' nights; yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look . . ."

"Of course, everything I'm saying is in strictest confidence—you know that," Mrs. Stubblefield said.

"But I should have warned you," I replied. "I can't ever keep anything to myself. It's a great weakness."

She was a shrewd woman in her way, but she wasn't shrewd enough just then to keep out of sight the hopeful satisfied little flicker that hurried across her face and disappeared as she switched subjects on me again, but with a less abrupt approach.

"You've known our Milton Minor a long time, haven't you? Are you fond of him?"

I said I had and I was—in a nice way. And I was instantly aware of something quite curious indeed. It wasn't any star curve warning me, but something did . . . perhaps the chatty, just-two-women-sitting-here-together sort of way she settled down to it. But this was what Mrs. Stubblefield had been leading up to, and what she'd dismissed their Milton Minor to have quietly out with me alone. The rest—even her definite satisfaction that I'd probably repeat something she'd said that she wanted passed along—was all of some other piece of goods, pulled out and cut to measure for me to carry where I would. But this was *it*.

"He's such a brilliant person—so clever," she said. "And very sweet. He's been wonderful to me."

And then for half an hour Mrs. Stubblefield did a job of pumping that if I hadn't had to watch myself, skipping as I was from crag to crag like the cavedweller that I am turned to mountain goat,

I think would have been fascinating. But I've been in the hands of experts. Mrs. Stubblefield, good as she was, had no idea how many experts there are—male and female—in this nation's capitol, nor did she know about Colonel Primrose and those absolute X-ray parrot eyes of his. And she finally gave up.

"Well," she said, "I've certainly enjoyed talking to you." She stopped and looked over as the phone on the desk rang. "Shall I—?"

"No, I'll answer it," I said. Even then it had the unseemly aspect of a disguised race that I won because I was five steps closer at the start, though only two at the finish. I got the instrument as close to my ear as I could, to keep the sound from reaching her, and said "Hello."

"Grace, this is Milton."

It was Milton in a state of nervous jitters at that. And he didn't have to say so.

"Look—I'm at your house, and I'm going to stay till you get here. Make it snappy, will you? Has the old girl gone yet?"

I said, "Okay." I was aware of the old girl listening like a hawk. I pressed the rod down with my finger, cutting him off, and cradled the phone.

"Was that Mrs. Kent?" Mrs. Stubblefield asked quickly.

I shook my head. She waited a moment. Then she said, "Who was it? Mrs. Hallet?"

"No," I said. It was his nerves making his voice rise so she thought it was a woman. "It was a friend of mine."

The Great American's wife was not only a suspicious woman, she was an extremely curious one.

"Well, I'd better go," she said, reluctantly. "Unless you'd like me to wait for the man about the heater. You must be busy, aren't you, and I haven't anything to do, really. I'll be glad to stay."

"No, I'll stay," I said. "You go along. Your husband will probably need you."

She looked at me quickly. "Why do you say that?"

"Just because he seemed to like to have you around," I said, peaceably. She relaxed and gave me a mollified smile.

"I only wish he took my advice oftener than he does," she said modestly. "Well, good-bye. I hope you'll come and have dinner with us before we go. Although I think we'll leave sooner than we

planned. We have to get home. My daughter's going to have a baby soon."

I didn't know she had a daughter, and we talked about that awhile as I edged her out, step to step, to the front door. And I'd no sooner closed it on her and turned around than I halted, almost startled out of my wits. Susan Kent was in the dining-room door. She was pale and trembling. She put her head against the frame and closed her eyes.

"Oh God, I thought she'd never go," she whispered. "I thought she'd never go."

I could still hardly believe I was seeing her, and she was like a ghost anyway.

"When did you——"

"When she was talking about Ellery being in love with Dorothy Hallet," she said before I could finish.

I tried to think back. That would be after what she'd said about Bill attacking Joe Kramer . . . after or before, I really couldn't remember which, she'd run on so long.

"I don't believe it," Susan said. "I don't believe anything she said. I don't think Ellery would send Kramer out to kill anybody. For Mr. Stubblefield, or himself, or anybody else. It's . . . it's crazy. She's just trying to move the blame away from her own door. If anybody sent anybody, she did it herself . . . she or Mr. Stubblefield. Oh God, I'm so tired! I'm so tired I could die!"

She smoothed her dark curly hair back off her forehead, swaying a little as she went across the foyer to the living room. I followed her.

"I saw her car out in front of the Hallets'. I didn't want to see her, and the detective was nice about it. He drove me around and let me off down in the garage. I came up the service stairs."

I looked quickly at the open casement window at the side of the house.

"Where is he now?"

"He's still down there. I didn't tell him it was Mrs. Stubblefield. I just told him it was a very rich woman I didn't want to see because she was a terrible gossip."

She went over to the window and looked out.

"He couldn't get up there anyway. There's a fence. He'd have to come around the front, and I was watching anyway."

She looked vaguely around the room, as if something was different, some way, and finally her eyes reached the fireplace and the cigarette butts littering it and the table beside the chair. She seemed more bewildered, at first, than alarmed. She frowned a little as if trying to remember if that was the way she'd left it.

"They took me back and took my fingerprints," she said. "I wasn't supposed to hear what they said . . . but that—they think that is the gun she was shot with?"

I nodded.

"It was right there, this morning." She pointed out into the hall "It was partly behind the door. I mean it was over toward the side as if it had been on the floor and pushed back when Bill opened the door. It could have happened that way, couldn't it?"

She sat down on the arm of the sofa under the windows looking down into the Hallets' gardens, and smoothed her hair back from her forehead again as if the pressure of it there made her head ache and fogged her brain.

"I've been trying so hard to think. I can't understand what's happened. Somebody must have slipped it through the letter slot and onto the floor. It's wide enough, isn't it?"

I moved to where I could look out at the front door. The slot about two feet from the bottom level, was at least two inches wide

"I know it is, because the folded paper goes through," Susar said slowly. "But what I can't understand is why anybody would do it. I didn't know anybody hated me that much. But somebody must, mustn't he? I can't figure it any other way."

I couldn't figure it, so far, anyway at all. "You didn't hear anything drop?" I asked.

She shook her head. "The rug would deaden it. And Bill wouldn't notice, pushing anything, because the rug catches sometimes and folds, so you push it when you push the door open. And anyway I'd closed my door, and I guess I went to sleep the way I was. I didn't get up and get undressed until after Bill came home. That was after three."

Her voice was far away. Her eyes rested on the mess in the fireplace again, puzzled, with two small lines between her dark glossy eyebrows.

"I . . . thought he went out," she said slowly. "I didn't come downstairs. Maybe he didn't go out."

It was the cigarette stubs in the fireplace, I knew, that prompted that.

"He was here when I came about an hour ago," I said, as gently as I could. "He told me to tell you he wouldn't be here to dinner, but he'd come later, and wanted you to be here."

It was like watching a slow-motion picture of a person gradually coming to life and consciousness. She didn't seem at first to hear, and as she did, not to understand. Then as she understood, she looked up at me, her body stiffening slowly erect, her eyes moving from me to the fireplace again; and all the time she seemed to be rising from the arm of the sofa until at last she was on her feet. Her eyes were alive, the rest of her face mat-pale, blank, without any emotion or thought on it. She turned so slowly I could hardly see she was moving until she was facing the lyre-pedestaled table in front of the window at the side of the room. Then she was going over there, very slowly, almost like a bird charmed by a serpent. She put her hand out, took up the lamp and put it on the window sill, balancing it with one hand as she lifted the table top with the other. She stood there looking down into the open cavity. It seemed like a very long time that she looked into it before she lowered the top again and put the lamp back, and stood there, steadying herself with both hands on the mahogany ledge.

When she turned her eyes were strained and widely opened.

"Has he gone away, Mrs. Latham?" she asked slowly.

"He took a suitcase," I said. "But he's coming back tonight."

She moved back to the sofa and let herself slowly down into it, staring straight in front of her.

"He knows, then," she said, in a low dead voice. "There isn't any use any more, now he knows."

I let her sit there a while. Then I said, "There's a lot of use, Susan. If I call his office and tell him you're here, and need him, he'll come. Then you talk to him as you should have done last night."

"It was too late last night. It's later now."

She shook her head. "You don't know him. I don't think I really did, until last night, either. I . . . tried to tell him, when we came home. Something must have happened when he went upstairs to get my bag I left on the love seat. He came down again. He was wonderful. He put his arm around me and said 'Home, baby. Let's get out before I drive any more money changers out of the temple.'

He seemed amused about something, and more like himself than when he's working all the time. So I . . . I thought I'd tell him."

Neither her face nor her voice, dead blank, had changed.

"I just started. I said I had something awful to tell him, and he had to try to listen, and understand. He changed just like *that*."

She moved her hand in a quick small gesture.

"We were sitting right here, his arm around me. He got up, just looking at me. I . . . couldn't do anything or say anything. He looked so . . . so awful, as if I'd lashed him in the face when he'd thought I was going to kiss him. He went over to the door and went out. So I knew something had happened."

"Somebody must have said something he hadn't believed," I said gently. "He was putting it—"

She nodded mechanically. "I thought of that. I didn't know who it could be. It couldn't be Ellery Seymour or the Stubblefields. And nobody else knew . . . except you."

"It wasn't me, Susan—or any of the ones you've named," I said. "Don't you see how it could be just somebody—anybody—who knows how much it costs to live well, and dress well, in Washington?"

She sat quietly for a long time, looking out into a blind limited space.

"What do I do now is the question," she said at last. "I've quit telling myself I didn't mean any harm. That has nothing to do with it any more—what I meant or didn't mean. I stayed awake until I got up this morning trying to see it again the way it used to look when it looked all right. I don't see now how I thought it ever looked that way. I should think a baby could have seen it was all wrong."

"Maybe that's what you were, then," I said.

She nodded. "A dim-witted baby that thought she was smarter than anybody else around. But I really didn't know till I tried to make it sound plausible to you yesterday that it just couldn't sound that way. It wasn't plausible, any time. It was just plain dishonest.—And then the horrible thing."

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She moved a little as if trying to ease a pain gnawing somewhere inside her.

"The horrible thing was last night," she said. "I was in a panic when we went over there to Dorothy's. I was going to try to see Ellery Seymour and explain that I'd made a mistake, and call the whole thing off. I kept trying to catch his eye, or get near enough to him to tell him I wanted to talk to him, but he was always somewhere else with a lot of people around him. Then that woman came, the woman in black, and I heard some one repeat her name. She'd called me up in the afternoon and told me she had something she thought I'd like to know about the way the Stubblefields did business."

"*Bertha Taylor?*" I asked. "She'd called you, before the cocktail party?"

She nodded. "I went down there, right away, but she wasn't there. That's when that child saw me. So when I saw her at Dorothy's I thought I'd slip out after her. She went into the library and I followed her, but she'd disappeared by the time I got there."

"Was the gun there then?"

"I didn't see it. But I didn't go in. Then I saw her going down the stairs. I went back. Later, after everybody cleared out, I did see Ellery Seymour. I asked him to get Mr. Stubblefield and come into the library—I had something to tell him. I went on in, and waited and waited. Then I began to realize he wasn't coming and wasn't bringing Mr. Stubblefield. Something seemed to happen inside me. I got in a perfect panic of terror. It just struck me all of a sudden.

"And that's when I saw the gun. It was lying right on the floor beside a chair, just enough under it so you wouldn't see it unless you were just staring right down at it. I picked it up. That's when I turned around and went behind the door. That's why I told you I didn't know whether I meant to shoot Mr. Stubblefield or not. And I still don't know. I guess I both did and didn't. That sounds like what Bill calls a paradox, but it's really true. I don't know. If Kramer hadn't come in and grabbed my wrist and started making

such a row, I might have shot him . . . but I don't think I was far enough out of my head really to have done it. I knew all the time it wasn't going to help anything."

"I don't see that it would have," I said.

"But now I don't know. I don't know whether somebody has me all figured out, like a first-grade reader, so they leave guns where I can get them, and then plant them on me after somebody's murdered, the way they did last night, so I'll do just what I did today. It's a funny feeling to have."

She shook her head slowly, staring down at the rug on the stone floor.

"I don't know why, but it sounds like a woman, to me. I don't know any man who'd be able to figure out just exactly how I was going to react."

"Do you mean me, or Dorothy Hallet, dear?" I asked quietly.

She looked up at me then.

"I don't mean you. Maybe I do mean Dorothy Hallet. Maybe I mean this Bertha Taylor woman, if she left the gun in the library. Or maybe I mean Mrs. Stubblefield. She could have put it here last night. It doesn't have to be the same one doing both. The first could have been accidental. Maybe only the second was deliberate. But I just don't know—I'm not thinking any clearer about this than I did about the first. I don't really believe Dorothy Hallet did it. I don't think she likes it that Theodore and Ellery Seymour have been as nice to me as they have, but I don't think she'd do a . . . wicked thing, like that."

"I don't think so either," I said.

"And of course there are some men who have . . . female minds. Freddie Mollinson has one. So has that man who writes the books—Mr. Minor. I don't know about Joe Kramer. You wouldn't think so. I don't think he's got much of a mind at all, but I don't like what he has got. He called me up here—twice. Once just after Bill left, and then around one o'clock."

I looked at her with genuine surprise.

"Kramer?"

"He said he thought he and I could talk business. I told him I didn't know what he meant, and he said I knew all right and he could really make it worth my while."

"What did you say?"

"I hung up the phone. The second time I hung up as soon as I heard his voice."

I wondered whether the blond young giant had come out to get her for Mr. Stubblefield that morning, or to talk business then. It could have been to kill two birds with one stone. I also wondered exactly what it was that Bill Kent had done to him.

"First I thought he was just being a wolf, but I don't know, now. I don't know anything. I just feel sort of dead all over, and it's somebody else talking, not me myself. But I don't think it was me he was interested in. It just struck me all of a sudden that he was doublecrossing somebody. Maybe Mr. Stubblefield. And I'd be the one to help him, because he really believed I was about to shoot."

We sat there in silence for a moment. Then I said, "Susan, where did you leave your evening bag? In what seat?" Something that had only half registered while she was talking came up sharply in my mind just then.

"In the gold brocade love seat near the door. I left it there quite early, before I went in the library and found the gun. Why?"

"Nothing," I said. "I just wondered."

Which wasn't true. It was the gold brocade love seat that Milton and I were sitting in before we left . . . the one near the door where Dorothy Hallet had hastily parked the gun when she'd heard Bill coming up the steps. I wondered about something else then.

"What happened to Dorothy when Bill was upstairs? Did she come down to you?"

Susan nodded. "She came down, and said I wasn't to worry. She was very nice when you think what a ghastly scene I'd made—twice in the same evening."

It was possible, then, for Bill Kent to have taken the gun when he picked up the evening bag. It was also possible for Dorothy really to have thought Milton Minor took it. I'd just wondered whether she knew Bill had taken it and was trying deliberately to shift suspicion to Milton. In any case, there were two entries at least: Milton and Bill.

I looked over at Susan. She was sitting up looking around the room, not blank and dead-faced any more. And suddenly, without any other warning than that, she crumpled into a dreadful little shaken heap on the sofa.

"Oh, he's gone! I can't stand it, I just can't stand it!"

It was like somebody numbed with the agony of death waking up to its ceaseless meaning . . . some one you love gone for a moment, until the awareness breaks that it is not for a moment but forever. She was sobbing with the bitterness of irrevocable loss and utter despair.

"He's coming back tonight, Susan," I said.

She shook her head back and forth on the cushion. She knew, and having seen him I couldn't tell her she wasn't right.

"It's too late."

Inarticulate and hardly audible as it was, it carried a conviction of truth as hopeless as only truth can be.

Well, I didn't know what to do. I couldn't stay there indefinitely, and I couldn't leave her alone in the house. After a few moments I went upstairs and got her dressing gown and hairbrush and comb. I found a bag and put them in it, and went downstairs again.

"You're going to come home with me, Susan," I said. "We'll try to get hold of Bill this afternoon and have him come to my house. Or you can come back here after dinner."

I put the bag down on a chair and went out into the kitchen and down into the garage. Captain Lamb's man was down there sitting on the steps talking to a motorcycle policeman out in the road. I don't particularly like going around in police cars, but it seemed simpler than getting a taxi and having him trail us. And he was very co-operative. I suppose it isn't often that people the police are supposed to tail avail themselves of the transportation facilities thereby involved. He even helped me to get Susan downstairs into the car and locked the doors and windows for us. And she didn't make any fuss about coming. I think she was too miserably unhappy to do anything but what she was told to do.

I don't know that fear ever can have dignity. Maybe it depends on the level of it, and the certain amount of just plain ordinary guts that keeps it from being not fear but cowardice. It's still horribly revealing, and not fear itself as much as the things people fear. I suppose that was what was a little shocking about Milton Minor when I went out into the garden where he was, after I'd turned Susan over to Lilac to take upstairs, and make lie down quietly awhile, hoping she'd get a little sleep. The gifted-biographer out-

ward semblance, the coat-of-mail of glittering effrontery, was gone. All that was left was a little guy scared pea-green. He was sweating profusely, but although anybody can and must do that, it being summer in Washington, D. C., neither the season nor the climate explained the tremor in Milton's hands or his general resemblance to a nervous jellyfish afloat. The lawnmower was out there and he could just as well have pushed it as he walked up and down. It would at least have given him a useful way of putting in his time. But he just paced back and forth, up and down, his shoulders twitching, mopping his forehead.

I watched him for a moment before he knew I was there in the door at the end of the hall, though he was keeping an eye on the long windows in the sitting room. When he did see me he came hurrying over. He was a little better almost at once, as if an audience was all he needed to force him into something approximating his normal mould.

"What's going on, Grace? For God's sake, here I am—I don't know a damn thing that's happening!"

"Somebody's chained you to the wall?" I asked. "I thought you said you were still a reporter."

"E. B. asked me to keep out of sight. He—"

"E. B. Who? I mean which one?"

"Stubblefield, of course," he said irritably. "He doesn't want the trail leading to him if he can help it, and you can't blame him. He's really . . ."

His voice wavered to a stop. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing at all," I answered. I turned to go back into the sitting room, where it was about twenty degrees cooler. "I'm just surprised. Yesterday you were calling him a big baboon. Last night you were the amateur detective prancing off to find out what all the dope is. Now you act like an office boy scared he's going to be fired. I'm just trying to readjust."

He sat down, took out a handkerchief that had reached the saturation point so long before that the pocket of his seersucker coat was as wet as it was, mopped his forehead again, and got up again.

"Was he annoyed with you for knowing about Bertha Taylor?"

"He doesn't know I know about her. That's one of the points, Grace. You've got to keep that off the record.—You know, this is a

damned serious business. I mean, above and beyond the little lady getting herself knocked off. You don't realize how serious. I could be out on my tail, a book almost finished and no takers. I can't afford it, I need the dough."

"Dear me," I said. "You've needed it before, haven't you?"

"This is different. I've sold out, now. It's too late to make a comeback."

I looked away. There was something a little too abject about the way he'd said that. Somehow, furthermore, it didn't ring with any high resonance of truth. He was scared but not that scared—not about losing his job, anyway.

"Ellery Seymour knows you called Livingstone, Montana, and why, Milton," I said. "Lamb had a report this morning. So Mr. Stubblefield probably knows by now."

I looked around at him after a moment, half expecting that the silence meant he'd caved in absolutely. But not at all and quite the contrary. He seemed to have snapped together like a fresh elastic.

"What else does he know—your friend Lamb, I mean?"

He said it so abruptly that it startled me, and I must have looked startled. He pushed his dank hair back with both hands.

"I don't know what the hell's the matter with me. I guess I need a drink. Mind?"

He was in the dining room before I had a chance to say whether I minded or not. He poured himself what looked to me, when he came back with it, like a fairly heady dose.

"—What else does he know?"

He said it as abruptly as he had before and stood with his feet apart looking at me, rather too much in the attitude of command, it seemed to me, since it was my house, my liquor, such as it was, and my information he was presumably interested in getting. I might have been annoyed, except that just then something seemed to click in the back of my mind. I wasn't annoyed, I was worried. It was an odd sort of worry. It was like a caterpillar with cold feet crawling lightly up my spinal column.

I don't know whether he felt it or whether it occurred to him rationally that his technique could be improved on. He relaxed from his Napoleonic stance, came over and sat down beside me on the sofa.

"Come on, Grace—kick through."

He reached a moist clammy hand over for mine.

"Remind me to tell you I'm nuts about you when this is over, will you, baby? It's important right now but it's not immediate. And boy, is this other important? I'm telling you, this is the works, Grace, and we're right in line together."

I got up and moved over to a chair. "Don't act Hollywood, or whatever it is, Milton," I said. "You're unattractive when you do."

"Have it your own way. But listen. This is the pay-off of the century, happening right now. Get that, baby. There's a story here that's the honey story of all time, ancient and modern. I've been getting a whiff of it off and on, and if you get enough whiffs, pretty soon you get a smell. Baby, does this smell?"

"Is that what's scared you?" I asked.

"You're damn right it is. It scares the living bejaegers out of me, and no foolin'. I play it one way and it's gold in my shoes. The other, and I'm . . ."

He made a light gesture with his glass. "Poof . . . sunk. That's straight dope. And you're going to tell papa how to play it."

He leaned forward, his eyes fixed intently, glittering bright, on mine.

"Kick through, Grace.—Has anybody mentioned Joe Kramer to you this morning?"

"Joe Kramer?" I said.

"The Body. Young Tarzan. You know, the handsome blond boy muscle man. Has his name come up in any of this deal?"

He drained his glass. When he leaned forward closer to me I felt myself edging unconsciously back into my chair. I didn't like the glint in his eye, and I didn't like the way the two lumps of ice tinkled like little warning bells in the bottom of his glass, or the caterpillar feet cold again on my spine. I don't mean it had anything to do with me. It had none. The glint was ruthlessly impersonal, the profit motive gilded with malice, with delighted malevolence.

"I'm sure I'd have remembered if I'd heard it," I said.

"I'm sure you would too. The point is, did you? Quit stalling, baby."

"Quit calling me baby, will you?" I said. "I don't like it, and I'm rapidly getting to the point where I don't like you, Milton."

He smiled. "Quit stalling, Grace. Quit stalling and kick through."

I hadn't been stalling and I had no intention of beginning, but

when the telephone ringing cut me off abruptly, starting to say so, I was aware of a startling sense of relief, as I got up quickly to answer it. It was strange, because I wasn't afraid of Milton Minor any more than I'm actually afraid of snakes. I just don't like them close to me.

"Hello," I said.

"Is this you, ma'am?"

I don't know why the rasping concrete grinding out at the other end sounded sweet and smooth as honey to me then, but it did.

"Yes, it is, Sergeant Buck," I said.

Being able to say his name aloud in front of Milton Minor, who'd got up and was heading toward the dining room again, was like having an armed guard of friendly natives lined up outside the door.

"Sit down in a chair and listen to what I got to say, then, ma'am."

I reached back, pulled the desk chair closer and sat down in it. He'd probably specified a chair because he didn't think I had sense enough to think of one myself. Then I understood. I'd done an injustice to Sergeant Buck. I listened until he'd finished, and then I said, "All right. I . . . I'll be glad to."

"Thank you kindly, ma'am."

I heard the dial tone in my ear for quite a while before I snapped to and put the phone down.

"How is old Iron Pants?"

Milton came back from the dining room, the decanter in one hand, his glass in the other, preparatory to encouraging himself further.

"Sergeant Buck is fine, apparently, if that's who you mean," I said, who've called Sergeant Buck everything I could think of to convey the same idea and now resented Milton Minor's doing it because he was being insolent and superior to us both. "And Joe Kramer's name has come up . . . come up, and gone down again."

Milton tilted the decanter back from the glass and looked at me. It was a swift penetrating glance that I ought to have made a better judgment about than I did.

"What the hell do you mean . . . come up and gone down again?"

"I mean he's dead," I said. "Up at the Preston Hotel. In Betty

Livingstone's room. The back of his skull's caved in. That's what I mean. Come up, and gone down again. In short, somebody has murdered Joe Kramer."

Milton stood there, his eyes bulging, glassy marbles, his face putty-colored jelly, quivering in strange places. The crash was my decanter and glass landing on the floor at his feet.

I went over to the fireplace and pressed the bell, but Lilac was already halfway up the basement steps.

"Clean this up, please, Lilac, and get Mr. Minor some coffee. I'm going out."

Milton was wavering unsteadily back to the sofa, with Lilac a black thundercloud surveying him and the broken crystal and bourbon and ice on her waxed pine floor. But it was me she attacked as I passed her in the doorway.

"Where you goin'? You stay home. You stay right here where you is. You hear!"

I heard, but I went on. What I hadn't told Milton was that Joe Kramer when he died had clutched in both hands a gray wig and a black dress. I didn't tell Lilac where I was going because I was going to the Preston Hotel. Sergeant Buck wanted me to see if I could, as he called it, idemnify them as the gray wig and the black dress that had converted Betty Livingstone, young and blond, into Bertha Taylor, old and worn out, the conscience and the pursuing nemesis of Enoch B. Stubblefield and the bloody boomerang of sudden death.

What I couldn't understand was why he should have told me not to bring Dorothy Hallet.

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I soon found out why Sergeant Buck didn't want me to bring Dorothy Hallet to the Preston Hotel. And I should have known. The reason was that it wasn't safe. He said so himself, not being frank but just literal. If there was a slightly hollow smile on my face he ignored it—or "ignered" it rather, as he'd have said if he'd been called on to mention it at all. It served me right, of course, because I'd gone racing up there, flattered because he'd called on me. It was merely pride that deserved its fall. It did change my

attitude, however. Hereafter anybody could call him anything they wanted to.

The Preston Hotel was dingy and certainly not luxurious, in spite of the break the papers gave it when they got the story. Still, it was an improvement on Mrs. Kelly's empty boarding house. Betty Livingstone's room was on the third floor, overlooking the Post Office and the expanse of concrete and fountains around the Station, and the Capitol through a side window.

"She checked in Friday," Captain Lamb said. "Had to have a room with a telephone. She stayed here Friday night. The maid says that's the only night she slept here. She kept the room, came here during the day. She had a visitor Sunday afternoon but nobody remembers seeing who it was. There were a couple of glasses in the room. They'd had whiskey and water. She gave the colored porter what was left, about half a bottle. He threw the bottle away and doesn't remember the brand. Says it tasted funny. Could have been good stuff and he wasn't used to it."

Captain Lamb told me that on the way up in the rickety creaking elevator. He'd come to meet me, not the Sergeant. I suppose Buck thought it would compromise him. I didn't think of that then, however. It was before the hollow note was struck, and I was still feeling flattered and kindly.

"He's gone," Lamb said, referring to the late Kramer's battered remains. "Somebody got him over the back of the head with a blackjack, and kept on . . . a nice ladylike blackjack with Miss Livingstone's initials on it."

I looked incredulously at him, but he nodded seriously. Our footsteps echoed on the thin marbleized linoleum in the narrow hall. A door toward the front opened, and Sergeant Buck's gaunt granite form was there. That's when he told me they didn't think it was safe for Mrs. Hallet to come.

"Somebody might recognize her," Buck said. There was a spittoon handy, which he used. It seemed unnecessarily fastidious, considering the mess the place already was. They'd covered where Joe Kramer had been with an old cotton blanket from the double brass bed against the wall. It had a sheet still on it, and on the sheet was the gray wig, and the black dress.

Sergeant Buck motioned me over to them. "Can you idemnify them there, ma'am?"

I looked at them. It was absurd not to pick them up so I could look closely at them. They seemed to have brought so much blood in their trail already that I suppose I was superstitious about them.

"The wig looks the same," I said.

I was trying to remember how it had looked on the woman standing hesitant and anxious in the rain by the rhododendron bushes at the end of the flagged path a long time ago. It seemed a very long time ago, and it took me a sharp wrench of the mind to realize that it was less than twenty-four hours. I looked at the dress. It was cheap rayon. The wattled spots had dried, but the cloth had shrunk where it had been wet and it was easily recognizable.

"This is the dress," I said.

I could see the blue eyes in the sad ill face against the Wedgewood blue of Dorothy's downstairs powder room, and the straggling gray hairs that "Bertha Taylor" had made no effort to do anything about. It must have been a terrific temptation to Betty Livingstone to look in the mirror to see if she was still convincing.

"I suppose she thought the bright light on her face might give her away," I said.

Captain Lamb waited for me to explain. I hadn't thought of it before, but it was probably the truth. The rest of the lights in the house were pleasantly subdued. The sallow foundation and gray powder on her face wouldn't show anywhere except at the dressing table, where the lights were bright, and where I was standing while she waited over by the door.

"Where is her scarf?" I asked. "She had a black scarf. It was over her head when I met her outside the Hallets. She put it on her shoulders when we went in, and then later I saw her tying it around her head for a turban, down on the terrace. She had a car, too, on the Park Road. Where is that?"

Captain Lamb was writing in his notebook. "Anything else?" he asked laconically.

I couldn't remember anything else, but I began to tell them about all of it, beginning at the beginning—her first phone call to Dorothy Hallet at my house, in the guise of Mr. Stubblefield's secretary.

"And Mr. Stubblefield's secretary is a man," I said. "Mr. Seymour seemed to think both of us, Mrs. Hallet and I, should have known that and not been taken in."

I told them about her second call, but I left out about that odd feeling of the theatrical I'd had. They'd think it was something I was adding, now that I knew, and I didn't want to prejudice myself as an accurate reporter. The rest of it I told them as literally as I could.

"She must have been very good, to carry it out," I said.

"She was taking a part she knew pretty well," Lamb said. "This impersonation's happened three times in the last year. At least they say out in Livingstone the mother hasn't been out of town for longer than that. But this was the first public performance. Mr. Stubblefield says the other two were on the quiet."

He went over to the dead girl's suitcase on the table by the window.

"Here's a letter she started to her mother, Sunday afternoon."

He handed me a couple of sheets of the Preston Hotel's stationery.

"Dear Mums," I read. "I've taken to the road again— guess where? It's an awful dump I'm in, but it's out of the way and safe as houses. Some day I'm going to tell you all about it, because you'll laugh till you bust. It was a divine idea. I only wish I'd thought of it myself. But this time I'm gilding the lily—doing a little ad libbing on my own. It's going to be more fun than I've ever had before if I don't get hysterics in the middle of it. It's what we call a bit part. I'm only on stage a few moments but what a stage! I'll tell you all about it when I get home in August, so get ready for a good laugh."

"I'm fine and I hope you are. I hope you're being careful. I didn't think your last letter sounded very good, but I know you're trying. I still have the apt. but I'm alone a lot, which I guess can't be helped. It's the trouble with traveling men but now the war's over I hope it's going to be better. I have no other complaints, so I'm really lucky. I— There's a call for me. I'll finish later, or after the show tomorrow, to tell you how it went off. I hope I don't get stage fright and bungle—"

It ended there. I read it through again.

"So her mother doesn't even know about it, does she?" I said.

Captain Lamb shook his head. "It looks that way."

"Was the call from downstairs?"

"No. From the outside. The only reason we know anybody was here was the bottle and two glasses. It was a man who called, and

the clerk says he remembers it was a different voice from the other man who called. She never called out herself."

"What about this traveling man—is she married?" I asked.

"We're checking in New York on that. We've got a report from her agent. He says she was doing all right, really getting somewhere, on the stage, when she threw it all up. She left her name on his books, but she refused all the parts he got for her, until the last two years she's been going out of town on calls—these here, I guess. He doesn't know anything about them except they come through his office. He relays them to her, she sends him fifty or a hundred bucks, and that's all he knows."

"He knows her address, doesn't he?"

"A box at the Central Post Office. That's what her mother uses too. That's all anybody knows about her, so far."

"Do you suppose she's been afraid of this? Is that why she was hiding?"

I went over to the suitcase and looked at the things on it. The lingerie was simple and in good taste, and could have been bought anywhere. There were no laundry marks or labels on any of it, and the suitcase had her initials on it but nothing else. The closet door was open. Three dresses were hanging inside, but none of them had a store label. One had had, but it had been taken out. There were two pairs of shoes, but they were old and the store name didn't help. It was a large store that does only cash business.

"Where is the blackjack?" I asked. "Is it still here?"

It was. Sergeant Buck had it wrapped in a towel on the dresser. He unwrapped it without visible enthusiasm. I expected from his reluctance to see it still had evidence of its recent use, but it hadn't.

"No prints," Captain Lamb said. "They washed it off."

I looked at it. It was an artistic job of blackjack making. It was covered with green pebbled leather, still damp, with a leather loop to slip over the wrist. The top had a silver mounting, and the silver mounting had a red stone "E. L." set in it.

"Stimulated rubies," Sergeant Buck said simply.

"They look real to me," I said. I looked at the small lethal weapon with considerable curiosity. I'd seen them advertised during the dim-out in New York in the early days of the war. "Milady Walks in Safety" was one ad I remembered, under the name of a really

swank Fifth Avenue shop, with a picture of a delicate creature a zephyr would have blown away stalking down the street with her blackjack hanging from her wrist. The only one I'd ever seen in anybody's possession was in the bag of an English woman writer on her first visit. It was the first thing she'd bought in New York, she said. She'd read about us, and been to the movies, I guess.

"I should think you could trace that easily enough," I said. "It must have cost more than all her clothes put together. Those rubies are real, I'm sure of that. I wonder why she left it here in the room?"

"The maid says she didn't. She had it with her in her handbag. She says she showed it to her when the maid said she ought to be careful going out alone at night."

"Oh," I said. "Then it was taken last night, from that place on I Street—with the wig and dress." I looked at Captain Lamb. "—By somebody who must have known she'd have it?"

I tried to remember. "If it had been on her dresser, I think I'd have seen it." I was sure I would have. The rubies glistened fiery red in the sunlight. We must have seen it if it was out anywhere in the naked lamplight of the I Street room.

"When was Joe Kramer killed?" I asked all of a sudden.

"Around noon, it looks like," Captain Lamb said. "Nobody seems to have seen him come in either. Not today. He came last night and gave the hall boy five bucks to phone him at his hotel as soon as she turned up. I wouldn't be surprised if it didn't set him back ten to get in today. But we'll find that out. So far we've drawn a blank. There's a pretty shifty bunch around here, but the maid seems all right. She swears the wig and dress weren't here when she cleaned, if you call it that, this morning. Just the suitcase. Kramer had a tough day. He had a shiner on him, when he came."

I suppose I must have gasped, because both of them alerted at once.

"You knew about that, Mrs. Latham?"

"Do you mean a black eye?"

"I mean a great big black eye, Mrs. Latham. Like something hit him, hard."

"Oh," I said.

He looked at me for a moment. "I understand you took little Mrs. Kent over to your house after dinner."

I hoped it wasn't an association of ideas in Captain Lamb's mind, but I thought it was.

"And Mr. Kent hasn't showed up at his office on K Street today," he added. "Do you know where *he* is?"

"I haven't seen him since before lunch time," I said. I said lunch instead of dinner because all I'd had was a quick glass of milk before I went out to see Milton Minor in the garden. "He was home then, but he left right away."

"What was he doing home? He's supposed to be downtown at half after eight."

"He was waiting for a man to come and fix the hot-water heater."

"Yes?" Captain Lamb said politely. "He must have been surprised when the Kramer guy showed up. Hasty sort of fellow, isn't he?"

"—What are you trying to do, Captain Lamb?" I asked. "Pretend that Bill Kent gave him a black eye and then came all the way over here to finish him off with a lady's jeweled blackjack? Does that make sense?"

"I'm not pretending anything Mrs. Latham," Captain Lamb said peaceably. "You can't pretend, in my business. But you'd be surprised how many things that sound cockeyed to you and me sound okay to people I deal with. I'm just trying to check up on the people I know were around last night when this Betty Livingstone woman left that note in the Halletts' powder room. I've been busy today, Mrs. Latham. Now I'm checking on those same ones who were around when this Kramer got it too. That's all I'm doing."

I thought for a moment. "You don't think it could have been Kramer himself, checking on Bertha Taylor?"

"Could he have seen the note? Would he have been in that powder room? Who else in that crowd could have seen it?"

"Oh, anybody who left after she wrote it could have," I said. "It isn't a public comfort station marked 'Ladies Only.' It's just a downstairs lavatory, is all it is. Kramer could easily have followed her down. If he was watching his boss's interests you'd think he would."

"He did, but he lost track of her. The colored boy at the door says he came down and looked outside, and went back in. The Taylor-Livingstone woman went out the service door—one of the caterer's men let her out. He thought she was a maid in the house. But let's go back a ways, Mrs. Latham. Who was there when Kramer took the gun away from little Mrs. Kent?"

He went ahead without waiting for me and ticked them all off on his fingers. "Now then. Where were they around dinner time when Kramer was killed? Mrs. Hallet was home. I had a man watching her. She didn't go out till after you left with Mrs. Kent."

I didn't say anything. It might or it might not be true. She could have been home when Adams told me on the phone she wasn't. But I doubted it. He knew my voice, and unless she'd given orders not to be disturbed by anybody he would have let me speak to her. She must have had too much curiosity, if nothing else, to retire into any ivory-towered sitting room and close the whole world off.

"Mr. Hallet," Lamb went on. "He went to see this Mr. Mollinson, and didn't get in. Mr. Mollinson seems to be holding himself incommunicado."

And would for a long time, I thought . . . or as long as it took him to think up a story that would put him in a less unheroic light than the clouds of unglory he was trailing as he left the Hallets' last night afforded.

"Mr. Hallet then went down to the store on Connecticut Avenue he's rented for the Stubblefield Headquarters. He stopped the sign-painters working and went in his private office. We know he was there—it's got frosted glass windows—until he left around half after one. He went to the Metropolitan Club for lunch."

"Mrs. Stubblefield was with me about that time," I said. "She came about one."

"Twenty-four minutes past one, Mrs. Latham. She picked up our friend Milton Minor at the Mayflower around quarter past."

"When did you call to tell them you were coming to see Mr. Stubblefield?" I asked. "She said she was just leaving the hotel when you called."

Captain Lamb frowned. "I called there while you and Buck were waiting while I got the gun lined up. About eleven o'clock. She was supposed to be in the hotel—didn't leave it until a few minutes before she picked up Minor. The car was waiting at the door. It had been there all morning."

He took out his notebook and made an entry.

"Mr. Stubblefield was there too," he went on. "He had the press in for a drink and lunch between quarter to twelve and half after one. Seymour went straight back there from I Street. We know that, because Buck picked up the man that's been tailing him."

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"Oh, really," I said.

I looked at Sergeant Buck, that silent monument in granite planted by the door. There was no expression, as usual, on that face, except perhaps the slightest one to the effect that he needed no applause from the Ladies' Gallery.

"—Who was it?"

"He's got a temporary amnesia," Captain Lamb said coolly. "He doesn't remember who he is. When he's had a couple more hours where he is I expect it'll clear up. We'll be hearing from him any time now."

He went back to the business of who was where when Joe Kramer had clutched wig and black dress in both his hands.

"That leaves you and Mrs. Kent."

"It seems strange," I said, "that a bodyguard would let himself be knocked around like that?"

"It does, doesn't it?"

Captain Lamb agreed without interest, and went back to his notebook. "Mrs. Kent was getting fingerprinted at Headquarters. Her husband we haven't got any information on. Milton Minor, now. We don't have any on him, either, so far. Where's he now, do you know?"

"He's at my house," I said. "Or was when I left."

Buck and Lamb glanced at each other, in a quick communication that I had no way of interpreting. Except that they were both interested in the gifted biographer, or interested in his being at my house. I couldn't tell which.

"Well, that's the lot," Lamb said.

"Except Bill Kent, and he wasn't there when the gun episode happened," I said. "He'd gone early, and he didn't get back until the end of dinner, around ten o'clock, I'd imagine. He—"

Captain Lamb was looking at me with a quiet level glance that stopped me there.

"He left early? What time would you say?"

When I didn't answer at once, not knowing what it was I'd done, he went on. "Was it before or after the Taylor-Livingstone woman came?"

"After."

"Before she left, or after, Mrs. Latham?"

"I don't remember," I said.

"You ought to try to remember, ma'am."

There seemed to me something oddly ominous in that admonition I got from over by the door.

"But I don't actually know," I said. "About the same time, I'd say. But that would have been entirely accidental. He was going to his laboratory. She had nothing to do with him. A lot of people left about the same time. It was an awkward situation for everybody."

"How would you know he was going to his laboratory, Mrs. Latham?"

"Why, he said so," I answered, haltingly no doubt. "At least, he said he had to work."

Captain Lamb shook his head. "Maybe you'd better take my job," he said calmly. "You've got a way of knowing things I don't have. I have to stick to facts. I'm not in on this intuition deal you and my wife seem to get along on. I like to make up my mind on things you know."

He picked up the jeweled blackjack and turned it over in his hands, looking at it a little grimly.

"You said it was funny a guy like Kramer'd let himself be knocked around," he said deliberately. "You're right. It's damn funny, Mrs. Latham. Let me tell you how it could happen. Either the fellow wasn't very bright . . . or he had a reason of some kind for not wanting to hit back until he was ready to—maybe like this morning when somebody cut his eye open. Or, maybe he didn't figure he was in any danger—like this noon. Maybe he looked whoever it was over, and figured a big tough guy like him couldn't get hurt by anybody like that—even if they had this pretty little bauble hanging around their wrist. Nice little ornamental gadget, isn't it? Suppose you came in here with it right now. I wouldn't think it was anything deadly—not until I turned my back. I don't think I'd even think what it was till I felt it crash on the back of my head.—And if you weren't up on how much of a blow with this thing it takes to kill a guy, Mrs. Latham, and you damn well wanted to be sure he was dead, you'd keep on smashing away until you knew he was, wouldn't you?"

"I guess so," I said.

He nodded gravely. "And I'd still have a surprised look on my face when they found me, wouldn't I? Just like Kramer had on his. And the reflex would make me grab hold of the wig and the dress just like he did, so you could hardly pry 'em loose without breaking my fingers. That's what we had to do with Kramer."

He looked at me reproachfully.

"You've got to be careful, Mrs. Latham. You mustn't take it for granted this intuition stuff is going to warn you in time. Too bad Kramer didn't have a little, if it would. Do you understand?"

I nodded my head.

"All right. Let's get out of here. Have you got your car?"

I nodded again. Sergeant Buck opened the door. The phone by the bed rang as I started to go, and stopped as Captain Lamb picked it up.

"Lamb here," he said. Then he said, "Okay. Keep him that way."

He put the phone down.

"The fellow's ready to sing. He's scared now. He got that way when he read the paper the boys gave him."

I looked up at Sergeant Buck. "Is that the man who was following Ellery Seymour?"

"Yes, ma'am," Buck said. "Are you ready now, ma'am?"

He put me in my car and went back to the Preston Hotel. Just outside, before he went in, he stopped and spat once. It was a sufficient commentary, in a way, on the whole case, I thought as I moved into the heavy traffic coming from the Union Station next to the Post Office. I didn't, on the other hand, feel very comfortable about anything. Betty Livingstone was dead, and Joe Kramer was dead. I hadn't known either of them, and neither of them seemed to have played a particularly straight game, but to have hired out for rôles they decided to improve with a little dangerous ad libbing. It still remained that they were not only dead but neatly murdered, and apparently by a phantom who slipped in and out leaving no trace but the corpse to tell the tale.

For the first time since Captain Lamb had stood in the closet in the house on I Street, looking through the crack caused by the hanger hook on the top of the door, I had a creeping cold sensation that maybe he was right. Maybe Dorothy Hallet and I weren't walking in as bright unshadowed sunlight as we thought we were. Maybe there were phantom shadows that we couldn't see either.

And I hadn't told her what Captain Lamb had told me to tell her. I hadn't told Susan Kent, for that matter, what Sergeant Buck had told me to tell her. But that was unimportant. I didn't think it had so far even occurred to Susan that she had a ghost of a worry on that score. But it was important to Dorothy Hallet.

Because the traffic was heavy, it took me a long time to get out Massachusetts Avenue to her house. Theodore Hallet was just going in the front door. He turned to wait for me, an anxious, unhappy little man who looked as if his golden dream was getting kicked in the pants from all sides at once.

"Tell me what to do, Grace," he said. "I had the painters stop, this morning. I thought we should go on—rise from this temporary setback—but Mrs. Stubblefield called me. She telephoned that damned fortune teller of hers this morning, and the fortune teller took a quick look at the stars—it must have been a quick look—and said they weren't propitious . . . propitious, auspicious, whatever the word is."

"Don't you think she's probably right, this time, Theodore?" I asked.

"No, I don't think so, Grace. I think it's a kind of admission of . . . well, of vulnerability, that we can't afford to make. Nobody seems to know the story on the woman who came here yesterday. I asked Mrs. Stubblefield and Ellery Seymour, and they're as much in the dark as everybody else."

"Oh, *are* they?" I thought, but I didn't say so. The light would break on their darkness, and Theodore's, sooner or later anyway.

"It's very distressing to me, of course. You know I don't like to spend money needlessly."

He gave me a brief nervous smile. I couldn't help but laugh.

"Well, why should I, Grace?" he demanded.

"You shouldn't, dear," I said quickly.

"Today, for instance. I've had to hire private detectives to keep our headquarters from being overrun with curiosity seekers. The police just laughed when I asked them for help. I tried to get hold of Dorothy this noon to see if *she* couldn't think of some way we could turn all this to our advantage, but . . ."

He made a hopeless gesture with his free hand as he stood with the other on the door.

"Could she?" I asked.

"I expect she could have, because I don't know whether you realize it or not, Grace, but Dorothy is much more than just a social butterfly. She's a very intelligent woman—you'd be surprised if you knew how much I depend on her. But she wasn't home. That's the way it is. She's always somewhere just when I need her."

There was a faint touch of the familiar petulance in his voice as he opened the door. I went in when I think I'd rather have gone out instead. It was the cold creeping sensation again, not very active but active enough to be disturbing. And I don't mean I thought Dorothy Hallet had anything to do with it. She couldn't have, possibly, because she hadn't had the wig and the dress or the jeweled weapon. The first two at least were still on the bureau and the chair in Betty Livingstone's room as she and I got away from the terrible blue eyes staring at us from under the light on the bed. And the creeping feeling was gone the instant I looked up the stairs and saw her. She'd come out of the drawing room to look down at us.

"Oh, dear, I'm so glad you've come!"

I don't think she meant Theodore, but he did, and he was very pleased. He hustled a little as we went up the steps. He kissed her cheek.

"I'll be down as soon as I get a dry shirt on, Dorothy," he said, and dashed off upstairs to his room.

Dorothy took my arm. "Lord, I'm glad you've come," she said softly. "I've been trying to get you all afternoon. I'm frantic. Come on in. The great Enoch B. is here."

I wish when I'm frantic I could look as tranquil and composed as she did, her beige linen dress as cool as an eggshell, her dark eyes as unruffled as velvet. I look frantic when I'm frantic.

Mr. Stubblefield was there. So was Ellery Seymour. The lady Mutton was not. She was home, communicating, I supposed, with her seeress.

"—How do you do, my dear lady!"

Mr. Stubblefield was beamingly expansive. Mr. Seymour wasn't. He was not, apparently, like the other E. B. S., a large padded duck from whose well-feathered back unhappy things rolled with utter innocuousness. However, it was only in contrast, I imagine, that he looked a little harried.

"You've heard about my boy Kramer?" Mr. Stubblefield asked.

The beam was gone for a moment, and in its place there was a slight shaking of the iron-gray head to indicate some degree of sorrow.

"I feel he was on to something in the line of duty that led to this. I've given Seymour here orders to see that the police stay on the job. If they can't handle it, he's to get somebody who can. I take care of my men."

I thought Ellery Seymour gave him a slightly strained and even sardonic glance, but he held his peace. It was I who said, "I'm afraid you didn't take very good care of Joe Kramer, Mr. Stubblefield."

If he was annoyed at all he didn't show it. On the contrary, he favored me with a bland and genial smile.

"That's very good, Mrs. Latham—*touché*. But I'm going to make up for it now. I've ordered Seymour to get in touch with the family, and we'll take care of them."

"If you know where his family is," Ellery Seymour said. "I thought he didn't have one."

"I don't think he has," Mr. Stubblefield said. "But there's a girl somewhere. New York, I believe. He used to go up there. I never inquired about her. It's my wife who's curious about people's private lives. I think it's wisest not to concern myself. I get people I can depend on. When they prove themselves, I give them everything they need and no questions asked. Their private affairs are no business of mine as long as they do their job and stay out of debt. I don't like my people to be in debt. I've fired good men because their wives kept running them in the hole. Good men, broken because they didn't have sense enough to live on a dollar when a dollar was all they had. They weren't good men, if they couldn't do that."

Ellery Seymour got up and went over to the balcony window. He took a cigarette out of his pocket, lighted it and smoked for a moment. Then he came back.

"I and my wife liked that boy," Mr. Stubblefield was saying. "My wife was crazy about him."

I looked at him, a little surprised at what he'd said with such booming gusto. That wasn't the story I'd heard, unless Mrs. Stubblefield had changed her mind abruptly since one twenty-five o'clock.

"She's so upset she's gone to bed," Mr. Stubblefield said. "She

wants to leave Washington. I think I'll have to take her home, or send her home, if I don't get through my business here tonight."

He smiled reassuringly at all of us, in case we were worried about the little woman.

"Well, well!" He got up with new enthusiasm. "How are you, Ted? Good to see you, boy!"

Both Dorothy and I started a little. In the life of man, nobody had called Theodore "Ted" before, or "boy" for a long, long time.

"I want a little talk with you, if the ladies will excuse us. I belong to the old school—don't mix women and politics."

I had some idea that that was not quite the correct way to put it, but he meant all right, I'm sure, and Theodore, who'd been so wilted and discouraged when we came in, looked cheerful and pleased at the Great American's condescension.

"You talk to the ladies, Ellery," Mr. Stubblefield said. "Ted and I'll go in the library."

When they'd gone there was a pleasant quiet where we sat, for a moment, until Dorothy broke it.

"Ellery," she said abruptly, "—does Mr. Stubblefield *want* to be President? Or is he just letting Theodore make background for him on this deal you're putting over now? I really want to know. Theodore's such an innocent, in lots of ways."

Ellery Seymour put his cigarette in the jade ashtray beside him and pressed it out calmly, in no particular hurry to answer her. Then he said, "I think he does, Dorothy. In fact, I can say confidently that I know he does."

"And what about you, Ellery? Do you want him to be?"

He looked at her for a moment, and smiled. "I think that's a strange question to ask me, Dorothy."

"I suppose it is. Of course you would."

If Captain Lamb hadn't warned me about intuitions, I'd have had the impression that that wasn't the way he meant it, exactly. But Dorothy knew him far better than I did.

"I think E. B.'s more disturbed by today's events than he's letting on," Seymour said. "As I am, frankly. I can't make head or tail of any of what's happened. It seems fantastic, the whole thing, without rhyme or reason."

"I'm not so sure," Dorothy said. "That gun—I've told Grace about your getting it for me. Last night—you remember when we were

going in to dinner—Joe Kramer didn't unload it. I know, because I took it, off the mantel. And I put it over there just under that cushion."

She pointed to the yellow Chinese brocade love seat by the hall door.

"Somebody took it from there. And it seems to me there *must* be some kind of a pattern to all these things."

Ellery Seymour looked at her quietly while she was speaking . . . very quietly, it seemed to me, as if he'd suspended the general processes of life for a brief time.

"He didn't unload it?"

"No, he didn't."

He looked at her very thoughtfully for another instant. "Well, I'll be damned," he said. He got up, looking around the room. "Has the afternoon paper come yet?"

"No." Dorothy looked at her watch. "Try the radio. There ought to be some news about now."

He went over to the Chinese cabinet, opened it and switched on the dial. As the voice of the broadcaster rose he turned it down.

"—Connected the two cases this afternoon. The hotel room where the former football star and ex-Marine met a violent death was occupied Friday night by the blonde former show girl killed last night at a boarding house on I Street. Property belonging to her and known to have been in the I Street room was found in the dead man's hands when the police entered the hotel room."

"—That's the wig and dress," I said to Dorothy.

"The police have identified certain articles the nature of which they are keeping secret for the time being. It has been revealed, however, that the murder gun has been traced. The police refused to give the name of the woman known to have been picked up while attempting to throw it in the Potomac River at an early hour this morning."

Dorothy looked quickly at me. I moved my head toward the re-decorated stables.

"The investigation is still in its preliminary stages, Captain Albert Lamb of the District Homicide Bureau told reporters at a press conference at Police Headquarters a few minutes ago. Keep tuned in to this station for latest developments and other news from the only Washington newspaper that gives you up to the minute—"

Ellery Seymour switched off the dial, stood in front of the radio for a moment, and came back to his chair. He sat there without speaking, looking at a spot on the floor midway between my feet and Dorothy's.

"I still don't understand it," he said. "It—"

Adams appeared in the doorway, and Captain Lamb immediately behind him. Dorothy got up.

"Come in. We were just listening to the radio report. You know Mr. Seymour. Mr. Stubblefield is in the library with my husband. Do you—"

"It's Mr. Seymour I want." Lamb looked, however, at me. "I thought you were going home?"

"I'm on my way," I said.

"You can stay here, now."

He turned back to Ellery Seymour.

"Why should Kramer have had a private detective following you, Mr. Seymour?"

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New England as it is and not in the remotest degree what you would call mobile, Ellery Seymour's face still went through a curious kaleidoscope of emotions, beginning with the most definite surprise and passing through shocked annoyance back to plain ordinary disbelief. It was on the last note that he became articulate.

"It's absolutely absurd, Captain Lamb," he said curtly. "It's—"

"Then you'll be interested to know that that's exactly what he was doing," Captain Lamb said coolly. He was neither official nor abrupt. "You thought you were being followed by one of my men. We had the fellow who was following you picked up shortly after eleven o'clock this morning. He wouldn't talk, at first. When he heard what had happened to Kramer, he talked plenty. He's been tailing you, off and on, for two months."

Seymour stared at him silently, his expression changing from incredulity to something grimly close to anger. His lips tightened, and he glanced, I thought quite involuntarily, at the library door.

"There's no necessity to jump at conclusions, Mr. Seymour," Lamb

said soberly. "There seems to be some possibility, from what the fellow says, that Kramer was working on the side, let's say, for what you might call some of your competitors. It looks like Kramer was trying to find out what you were doing in this rubber deal you people are reported to have on. Kramer hired this man, who calls himself an industrial investigator, because he couldn't be in Washington and Chicago himself at the same time."

I thought the emotions on Ellery Seymour's face were a more curious mixture than before.

"That's . . . fine," he said dryly. "I hope he earned his pay. Did he say what I'd been doing?"

"He seems more confused than anything else," Lamb said. "We turned him loose. I've got his name if you want to talk to him."

Ellery Seymour's smile was mirthless.

"I don't see much point in it, Captain . . . I *know* what I've been doing. I was interested in what he may have told you. It's important at the present time to keep a little secrecy, at least. But I'll talk to him."

He gave Lamb another wintry smile. "It may even be worth our while to hire him ourselves."

"He seems to think you've got something pretty hot."

Seymour eyebrows raised.

"I hope he hasn't got the idea that we suspected what Kramer was up to, and used this method of silencing him."

"That's not indicated," Captain Lamb said. "Not . . . exactly, anyway. He was badly scared. He was afraid the tie-up might get him involved. He was in jail when Kramer was killed, but he didn't know that at the time."

"I see," Ellery Seymour said. He looked down at the spot on the floor again.

"Well, I don't, Mr. Seymour. I'd be glad if you'd explain."

Seymour got up. "I think you'd better come and discuss this with Mr. Stubblefield," he said coolly. "Kramer was his personal employee. I had nothing to do with him. I deal with the brains, not the brawn, of the organization. Will you come in with me?"

Captain Lamb followed him across the room. Seymour tapped on the door, and they went in. Tradition was being followed in the library, apparently. The air was blue and the fragrant odor of cigar smoke got to us after the door closed on the two of them.

"—I don't know why Ellery should be so pleased about it, do you?" Dorothy remarked calmly.

"I didn't think he was. I thought he was sore as blazes."

"He was, at first. Not when they went in there he wasn't. You can tell by the little quirk at the left end of his mouth. At least I can tell. He was quite pleased."

She got up. "Come on out here, and tell me for heaven's sake what's happening."

"Suppose you tell me first, dear," I said. "Where were you this morning? Captain Lamb thinks you were home, but I called you, and Theodore called you, and it seems you weren't. Kramer was killed around noon. They're checking on everybody. You're all right until Adams tells them different. Mrs. Stubblefield seems in doubt, he's okay. Bill Kent's really on the spot—he gave Kramer a black eye this morning and they think he may have decided to finish the job. Freddie Mollinson's home in bed. Ellery was at the hotel with Stubblefield. Theodore was at General Headquarters with detectives sitting outside his office—police as well as the private ones he hired. Milton Minor's not interesting enough to be kept tab on, apparently. So you see it's narrowed down. So, where were you, dear?"

Dorothy drummed her fingers silently on the balcony rail for a moment. "Me . . . where was I?" she said then. "At what time?"

She didn't look at me. She kept her eyes straight out across the valley of the Park, fixed on the trees on the other side below the Cathedral.

"Around noon," I repeated. "I don't know the exact time. Say from twelve to one. That ought to do it."

"I have no idea, Grace," she said after a silence that began all right but got oppressive, as heavy as lead, it seemed to me, before she broke it. She was very still. Her whole body was still. "At the time I have no idea where I was. I . . . I'll have to think. You're sure I wasn't home, Grace?"

"I'm not sure at all. I just asked you. Adams said you weren't, when I called you, and Theodore said you weren't when he did. He wanted you to think of some way to turn the crowds milling over the Stubblefield Headquarters into favorable publicity."

She laughed, but it ended in something startlingly like a sob.

"I wish I could," she said quickly. "I can't, I'm afraid."

She went into the drawing room and pressed the bell by the

marble fireplace. She waited there until Adams was in the doorway and came back out, nodding to him to follow her.

"You can bring cocktails out here for all of us." As he turned to go she said, "Adams, what time did Mrs. Latham call me this morning—do you remember?"

"No, ma'am. Not exactly. It was before lunch." He looked at me, puzzled that I didn't know myself.

"What time did Mr. Hallet call?"

"When I was eating my own lunch, ma'am. 'Bout a quarter after twelve."

"Then when did I leave the house? I seem all confused about this morning."

"You left just a few minutes before Mrs. Latham came next door to see Mrs. Kent, ma'am. I thought she was coming here, and was just getting ready to tell her if she hurried she could catch you going down to the Park."

"Thank you, Adams."

"And you came back round three o'clock, ma'am."

Dorothy smiled at him. "I remember that. You may bring cocktails now."

She waited for him to go.

"I guess I wasn't home, was I?" She looked at me calmly.

"Apparently not," I said.

"I guess I was lots of places. I sent some groceries and liquor home. I took Theodore's dinner coat to the tailor's. I got some flowers, and I ate lunch alone. I'll try to think where." She caught her lower lip in her teeth and held it a moment. "I'll have to think very carefully. I should have gone out the front way and let that stupid man out there follow me, and then I'd have known."

She put her hand on my arm. "But I didn't kill Kramer, Grace dear—believe that, won't you, lamb. I'd hate to think I *needed* to say that to you. I'm just saying it because I'm a little confused. I'm very confused, in fact."

She moved a couple of reed chairs closer to the low glass cocktail table and brushed some ash from the edge of it. Her face was as flat and motionless as a mask, her eyes grave.

"Why is Bill Kent on the spot?" she asked quietly, after a moment.

"He was out last night at some awkward hour," I said. "The murder gun—as they call it—was in the stable front hall this morning.

He hasn't been at his office since he gave Joe Kramer a black eye. Outside of that there seems nothing against him. Except that when he came up and threw Freddie into that state at dinner, he came upstairs to get Susan's bag, which was right over there."

I nodded at the inside yellow brocade love seat. I hadn't been looking at her until then, so I don't know when it was, in the course of what I'd been saying to her, that she'd frozen into the rigid golden marble statue she was now. Her lips were parted a little, her eyes blank but a sort of appalled blank. Her hand had reached out to the cigarette box and stopped motionless halfway there.

"—Dorothy!" I said sharply.

She put her hand on out to the crystal box, lifted the lid and took a cigarette. She went unsteadily to a chair and sat down.

"What is the matter, Dorothy!"

"Bill," she said quickly. "That's what's the matter. I don't believe it. I mean . . . oh, I don't know what I mean! But Bill had nothing to do with it—it's crazy to think he had. They can't do that to him!"

"That's what I said. And Captain Lamb said I'd be surprised—or something to that effect."

Her cheeks were flushed. She started to speak and stopped. Instead she went over to the Chinese cabinet in the drawing room that matched the radio on the other side of the balcony window. She opened it and took up the house phone. She came back to the balcony, holding it close to her lips and keeping her eyes on the library door.

"Adams—is Mr. Kent at home, do you know?"

I took it Adams said "No," because she said, "When he does, tell him I want to talk to him, right away. It's important."

She put the phone back, closed the cabinet door and came out to me again.

"I don't understand it, Grace."

"He's not coming until late, Dorothy," I said. "Susan's over at my house."

"That little idiot," she said hotly. She started to say something else and stopped herself abruptly. She seemed to crumple all of a sudden, and reached out for the balcony rail to support herself.

"Oh, my God, Grace, I can't believe it," she whispered. "I can't believe it. Bill didn't have anything to do with it! I *know* he didn't!"

Maybe I'm easily shocked—I don't think so—but I was really

shocked then. I know Dorothy Hallet doesn't look more than thirty-two or three, but she's the same age I am. We used to celebrate our birthdays together when we were children. I've never thought she was ice-cold, as most people do . . . in fact, I've always known she was a genuinely warm and even passionate person. But I never for the farthest instant in infinity would have believed she could forget every article of whatever creed any of us believe in and go into the kind of tailspin she was in at this moment. It was incredible. Bill Kent might be thirty—he couldn't be a great deal older if he was even that. I knew Dorothy liked him and he liked her. I would never have dreamed she could have any other feeling about him.

"Bill's got to be kept out of this, Grace. It isn't fair. He's too wonderful a guy—he really is. It doesn't matter about the rest of them, they can take care of themselves. It doesn't even matter about Betty Livingstone and Kramer. Bill does matter."

"Look, Dorothy," I said. "Have you gone crazy?"

"Yes— I have. I'm completely crazy . . . I'm out of my mind!"

It was the closest to hysterics I've ever seen Dorothy Hallet in the forty years I've known her. She took hold of my arm. Her brown fingers that look so fragile were like bands of steel.

"Grace—he didn't do it. No matter how it looks, he didn't do it! You've got to see that *nobody* thinks he did. If you never did anything in all your life, you've got to do that. He's being framed . . . don't you see that's what's happening to him?"

I stared at her. "By *who*, Dorothy? Who is framing him?"

I should no doubt have said "By whom," but what I said was "By *who*," and that's precisely what I meant.

"I can't tell you."

I could hardly hear her, even standing as close to her as I was.

"Do you know?"

She nodded quickly. She was pale amber and trembling. "I *think* I do. I'm not absolutely sure. I think I do know."

"Then listen, quickly," I said. "Before they come back."

That's when I told her what Captain Lamb had told me and told me to tell her.

"—Whoever it was was in the closet, and saw us both."

She moistened her lips. Mine were almost as dry as hers. Then she stiffened abruptly. The library door was opening.

"Ah, Adams—juleps. They look superb." Mr. Stubblefield's voice

boomed heartily through the open windows. "You'll stay, Captain, and join us, won't you?"

Apparently he already owned the house, by virtue of some extraordinary Eminent Domain.

"I wish you would, Captain," Theodore said.

"Thanks—I've got business still tonight."

We held our breath, or I know I held mine. I wanted a little time to get reassorted before I had to talk to Captain Lamb.

"I'll see you gentlemen later," he said.

We heard Theodore's voice. "Where's Dorothy?"

"We're here, dear."

She was tranquil as the summer sun again. If I wasn't tranquil I was in one sense relieved. I was also ashamed that I'd done her the kind of injustice I had. It was very wrong of me, and I'm still ashamed.

"Just put them on the table here, please, Adams." She moved the crystal cigarette box a little to make room for the tray with the handsome deeply frosted juleps, half a garden of green mint growing fragrantly out of each one. "And pull down the shades. There's such a glare here this time of day."

"But it's such a beautiful view, Dorothy," Theodore said. "The Cathedral's very fine.—What church do you belong to, E. B.?"

It had just occurred to him, apparently, and he inquired as anxiously as if he was afraid, now when the horses were far in mid-stream, that his horse might turn out to be a member of a Snake Cult.

"Well, Ted, I'll tell you." Mr. Stubblefield settled back in his chair. "I'm not much of a church-goer myself. I've been too busy. I give money to them all. Now my wife . . . Ellery, what church does Ethel go to? It doesn't matter. I guess any of 'em would be glad to have us. Pick out the best one and we'll take it."

"Don't take that attitude in public, E. B.," Theodore said. "The public—"

"Now, Ted—I know a hell of a lot more about the public than you do, boy." Mr. Stubblefield took the julep Dorothy handed him and sniffed at it. "This is first-rate," he said.

I couldn't tell whether he was as ebulliently pleased with life and himself as he seemed to be because of his conference in the smoke-filled room with Theodore, who looked pretty pleased him-

self; or whether whatever it was that had pleased Ellery Seymour so much, according to Dorothy, also pleased him when Captain Lamb told him about it. He was pleased about something, and expansive as a rubber balloon.

"What do you say, Ellery? Shall we break the good news? Where's my briefcase? Boy!"

It was Adams, not Theodore, he meant this time. Adams was rolling down the lau hala curtains.

"We have some samples—"

"I think we'd better wait, E. B." Ellery Seymour's interruption was not hasty but definite. He smiled at the great man. "You're too impulsive, E. B. God knows what you'd do if you didn't have somebody to hang on to your coat-tails. We still have a couple of people to hear from. Tomorrow will be time enough."

"Time!" Mr. Stubblefield said. "Time! You always want more time, Seymour. Check and recheck and double check. Good God! I could be making a million tons of rubber while you two-for-a-nickel laboratory hounds hold me up to make a dozen more checks when we've already checked until everybody in town knows what we're getting at. They know we're hot already. That dirty double-crossing young—"

"Have a drink, E. B.," Ellery Seymour said equably. "Remember your blood pressure, will you? I'll have all the data tonight and then you can cut loose. You'd be the first to bash me over the head the way somebody did Kramer if I let you slip up. Just remember the times I did stop you. Do you want me to remind you of them? Names and dates?"

"No!" Mr. Stubblefield said. He smiled, rather sourly. "What the hell do I keep you for? That's your job. That's what I pay you for, isn't it?"

"Right, E. B. It's my job to be patient. I'm very good at it."

Ellery Seymour smiled back at him. Mr. Stubblefield seemed mollified. He picked up his glass.

"Some people say all I am is a big-time gambler anyway." He smiled around at the rest of us. "I can hire people to be patient."

"To success, anyway."

Dorothy raised her glass. It must have been a relief to bury her face for a moment in the cool lovely mint leaves. I saw her eyes were closed. She opened them and put the glass down, noth-

ing gone from it. She nodded at Adams to indicate that he wasn't wanted any more, and he went along.

He couldn't have more than got down the stairs when the phone rang inside. Dorothy sat waiting, a little tense, listening to Mr. Stubblefield, to whom the word "success" was practically a command to monologue, while Theodore got up to answer.

"Excuse me, E. B.," he said, coming back. "It's Adams, Dorothy. He wants to speak to you."

"Ask him what it is, please, will you?"

Theodore went back and came out again. "He says Captain Lamb is over at the Kents' and the Kents aren't home. He wants to know if it's all right."

"Tell him I think it's all right," Dorothy said. "You might also tell him there's not much we can do about it."

Mr. Stubblefield was looking at her, genial and admiring. "I think it's you we need to run our big show, Dorothy," he said blandly. "I think you're worth two of most of the men I've got around me. What about taking over the woman's angle for us? Or maybe we need you right behind Ted here."

Ted wasn't here. He was still trying to make Adams understand that the police could go where they wanted whenever within legal limits. When he came back Mr. Stubblefield was launched into the one about every good man worth his salt having a good woman behind him. Which may be true, but I doubted how seriously Mr. Stubblefield believed it.

He broke off finally. "That Kent boy is doing great things," he said. "He——"

Ellery Seymour interrupted him again. "I think we'd better go, E. B. Finish your drink and let's get on. What about you people coming down and having dinner with us? Dorothy . . . and you, Mrs. Latham?"

"I can't," I said. "I'm late now."

"I can't either," Dorothy said. "Theodore might like to." She looked up at him and smiled.

"I'd better stay, I think. Still, I don't know . . ."

Theodore hesitated. It was obvious he'd like to go if pressed.

"Come along, Ted." Mr. Stubblefield got ponderously to his feet.

"It's been nice to have you," Dorothy said. She glanced at me, but I shook my head. I'd been away too long now.

"I'll go along," I said.

Theodore went out to the head of the stairs with me.

"What do you think of him, Grace, seriously?" he asked earnestly. "Don't you think he's an extraordinary man?"

"Yes, Theodore, I do," I said. "Extraordinary is the perfect word."

"Then how do I sell Dorothy on him, Grace? She isn't sold, a hundred per cent, yet, and you have to be a hundred per cent in anything like this. I don't understand it. So many of my friends don't see him as I do. Freddie, for instance. Freddie dislikes him violently."

"I wouldn't worry about Freddie, Theodore," I said. "Or about your other friends. What your friends think of him doesn't really make much difference."

He looked at me soberly.

"You think you're joking, Grace, but that's a very true word. You'd be surprised how little you count, all you people. You're a vanishing race. Of course, I am too, in a sense."

Theodore frowned just a little.

"There is one thing about him, Grace," he said. "I do wish Dorothy could tell him not to call me 'Ted.'"

22

I could think of a lot of other things about him, but I didn't have time, at the moment. The two Kents were beginning to weigh heavily on my mind. I hesitated at the end of the flagstoned path and looked along at the stables. It was too bad horses ever went out . . . it would have saved all of us a lot of trouble. The place was still tightly closed up, the way we'd left it when I took Susan to my house. There was still the mail slot, and I had some idea of dropping a card inside telling Bill where she was. I abandoned it at once as I saw Captain Lamb's bulky figure come around the far corner.

As a matter of fact, I wasn't sure, as I drove down Massachusetts Avenue to cut over to the P Street Bridge and home, that it mightn't be a good idea for him to come home and not find her waiting for him. It might give him a momentary pause. But when I thought that I hadn't seen the evening papers. The radio had merely said the

police were suppressing the name of the woman with the gun. It didn't say her picture was plastered over every evening front page, for any one to recognize and put a name to who chose. If I'd known that, I might have noticed that the man who got off the bus at the corner as I passed it was Bill Kent. It was only when I'd parked my car and started across the sidewalk to my front steps that I saw him.

He was striding up the uneven bricks toward me, the paper in his hand, hatless, his hair a moist dishevelled thatch on the top of his head. Why nobody had arrested him and taken him out to St. Elizabeth's before he got that far, I had no idea, or didn't until I saw his face. The answer was that nobody would have cared to. He was a young man with a purpose, and an unpleasant one. All I hoped was that he'd done his quota of black eyes for the day.

"Where is Susan?" he demanded curtly.

I had my key in my hand, but I didn't put it in the lock. Normally I prefer to have whatever words I have with people inside the house, not on the front steps, but this was different.

"I take it you know she's here or you wouldn't have come," I said. "Who told you?"

"The scientific imagination," he said, still more curtly. "And that miracle of modern communication the Bell Telephone. Your cook said she was here."

"If you'll look a little less savage, I'll let you in," I said. "She's had a tough day, and you're not going to act like a fool in my house. Sympathy is what she needs right now—"

"You can save that, Mrs. Latham," he interrupted. "She doesn't need any sympathy and she's not getting any, not from me. That's not why I'm here. I'm here to take her home. We can skip everything else for the time being. I'm doing it for her. I'd do it for a dog. So let's get going, shall we?"

I hesitated, but there didn't seem any use in saying anything more to him. Implacable seemed the word for him, and it was intensified a hundred fold now. There was an underlying bitterness that was too profound and disillusioned for me to dream I could reach. I'd misunderstood the hatlessness and the dishevelled hair. He would have done it for a dog. I put my key in the lock and opened the door.

"Susan?"

The house was so quiet that I thought she must have gone. For a moment, until Sheila came bounding out of the living room to greet me, I hoped desperately she had gone. But I knew then she hadn't. Sheila would have been down in the kitchen if somebody she liked hadn't been upstairs or in the garden for her to be with.

Bill followed me along the hall. The sitting room was empty, but the windows were open and Susan was out in the garden, curled up in a chair, her head on the arms, the evening paper in a disordered heap on the grass beside her. She raised her head as she heard us. She may have seen me, but it was Bill she got up for, quickly. She came running across the grass, her face lighted up. It didn't stay that way long. Maybe it was because he didn't move, or maybe she could see clearly enough in the sunlit evening to see what I'd been seeing. It was as if a sharp-bladed knife had come down invisibly from the sky and cut off the light in her face, leaving her blind, as if feeling her way across an unfamiliar country known only to despair. She was white as a ghost, but she had courage still. She came on until she got to the window, hesitated only an instant, and came on into the room.

"Get your things, Susan," Bill said. "We're going back to the stable.—It'll look better to the police for you to be over there, not here."

She seemed to understand that he meant a great deal more, without his having to say it.

"Is that why you came? To make it look all right for me with the police?"

"Can you think of any other reason I should come? You know more of the answers to that than I do. I only know a few."

It would have been hard for her not to falter a moment there, with him looking at her as he was.

"Thank you, Bill," she said then. "You weren't going to stay there tonight. I don't want you to stay there now, for that reason. If Mrs. Latham doesn't mind, I'll stay here tonight. Her cook said I could. I'm sorry about everything. You don't have to bother with me any more. I'll be all right."

"I don't doubt it," Bill Kent said quietly. "I'm sure you'll be better than all right."

Her cheeks flushed as violently as if he'd slapped her.

"That's not what I said. I mean it'll look better for you if you

seem to have a respectable background. That's all I'm offering. I don't want anything else. I'm not asking you for any explanation and I don't want any. And when I said I was offering you something I was wrong. I'm not offering anything, I'm telling you. You're damned well coming over there with me tonight if I have to pick you up and carry you over. I'm not doing it all for you either. Your picture's all over town tonight. It's in the papers and it's in the news-reel. It's your back, but it's still you, and as long as it's my name you've got, baby, you're going to be more careful with it. You can do what you like with your own life. I don't want mine written up all over the papers the way it'll be when they get the word we're not living in the same house. I don't want us to be made into hash for the sob-writers to dish down a couple of million frustrated gullets. That's what you'll get if you stay here or go to a hotel. You can't take your choice because you haven't got one. Now if you've got a coat, go get it. I'm hungry. I'd like to eat."

She went, not steadily but more steadily than I could have done if I'd been in her shoes, the scarlet in her cheeks faded to a burning red. The worst of it, as she'd realized, and as I did, was that he still didn't know what it was she'd done. He was just going on the bills and checks in the red paper file. What he was accusing her of was the simplest and oldest of the basic double-crosses. He had no idea yet that hers was in a sense much worse, because it involved a part of him that was much more important to him in the long run than his personal private life. If I'd felt sorry for her while he was talking to her, I could have wept for her now.

He went over to the garden window and looked out. Sheila was there. He put his hand down to her head, but she sidled away and came over to me.

"I don't seem popular with the women in this house," he said.

"You're not," I said. "We think you're stiff-necked and not awfully bright, I'm afraid."

He shrugged and moved over to the hall door. I could hear Susan's feet coming slowly down the stairs. He turned back to me.

"Thanks, Mrs. Latham. Don't bother to come to the door. And you don't have to worry, if you've got that in mind. I've said everything I've got to say, to either of you. Good night."

I said "Good night" and stood there until I heard the door close. Sheila went over and looked along the hall, and came back

and lay down with only a brief wag of her tail to let me know it was still all right between her and me. It's Lilac whose comment in times of stress is "Well, that's *one* consolation," but there's no reason why a dog shouldn't be a woman's best friend, too. And I needed one, because Lilac was hardly a friend that night. She served my dinner in a murderous silence, angry because I'd let that poor chile go. She was a little mollified, however, when Milton Minor came at half-past eight and I decided I'd seen too much of him already that day and let her send him away. She'd spotted him getting out of the taxi.

Butter wouldn't have turned even slightly soft in her mouth as I heard her say "No 'n deed, Mis' Grace ain't home tonight, Mr. Minor. She *out*. She out *somewhere*. She ain't *say* where."

People don't break decanter and glass in her house and come back the same day, if ever.

It was after that that I took the paper and went upstairs to bed. Susan's picture, taken in the morning as the detectives hurried her up the dilapidated brick walk to Mrs. Kelly's house, was the only thing in it that was startling at all. It was only her back, but it was astonishing how clearly it identified her, for any one who knew her. "Mystery Girl" was the caption, and under it was "Police Refuse to Name Beautiful Brunette in I Street Murder Tangle." On an inside page was Joe Kramer in his football clothes and the Preston Hotel with a white arrow pointing to the Murder Window. It was Susan who had the front page.

I think it was about half-past ten when I turned off my light, and later than that when I must have gone to sleep. I was very soundly there when the telephone ringing woke me abruptly. I sat up reaching for it so it wouldn't wake Lilac and send her into another savage temper to last over until morning. There would no doubt be plenty without this, and sufficient to the day is the evil thereof . . . unless, of course, she happened, as frequently, to wake up the angel of all times.

I brought the phone over without turning on the light.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello, dear."

It was Dorothy Hallet. But my heart sank, because Lilac had already reached the phone. I heard it click gently into place on the downstairs extension, though usually she bangs it. It never occurred

to me that the phone was possibly being raised, not lowered, the connection opened, not shut off.

"Hello, Dorothy," I said. "I thought you might come over to-night."

"No. I stayed at home," she said. "Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Milton isn't there?"

"No. He came, and was sent along. I'm alone and in bed and I was asleep."

"I'm sorry I waked you. Listen, Grace . . . I'm worried sick about you."

"Don't worry about me," I said. "What about yourself, dear?"

"I'm all right. Theodore's here. This place is like a fortress. We have burglar alarms and you don't."

"Don't be silly, Dorothy," I said. "I don't need a burglar alarm. I've got Sheila, just outside my door." I didn't hear her thump her tail against the floor, as she usually does when she hears her name mentioned, but she was probably half-asleep and didn't consider it worth while. "I'm quite all right, angel. Don't worry."

"But I *am* worrying, Grace. I'm worried sick. You don't understand. You've got to be careful, Grace. Please go down now and be *sure* everything's locked up. Anybody who could get over a wall could walk right in those garden windows of yours. Please look around again, just for me, will you? And leave a few lights on."

"Lights didn't do much for Betty Livingstone, Dorothy," I said.

I said it lightly, but the words left a curdled taste in my mouth, and I wished I hadn't said it. The picture of that terrible room as it was in the naked glaring light flashed into my mind. I glanced automatically at my closet door. It seemed to me I had shut it when I went to bed, but it was open a little now . . . a thin dark line cutting down the length of the white woodwork gleaming mistily in the silvery half-light through the open windows. I was being ridiculous, I told myself sharply, trying not to think of that other closet and the phantom shape tensed behind it, peering out, poised to strike if need be, while Dorothy and I stood horror-struck, staring at the blue glassy eyes of the woman in the green bed. I jolted myself sharply together.

"Everything's all right," I said. "The garden windows are really locked. So go back to bed and let me go back to sleep. The first

thing you know I *will* be jittery. Good night, darling, and don't wake me up again."

I put the phone back and lay down. For a moment or two I was all right and I wasn't all right. I looked over at the closet door, and then I sat up and turned on the light. I knew it was silly, but nevertheless I got up, went over and opened the door and looked inside. Nobody was there, of course. I closed the door tightly this time, before I went back and sat down on the side of the bed. Then I reached over abruptly and turned off the light. The garden had suddenly become peopled with dark sinister figures letting themselves silently down over the brick wall, creeping around, staring up at me, the perfect target, in the lighted open windows. I knew it wasn't true, but it made me uncomfortable nevertheless to think about it.

I said, "Sheila!"

There was no answer, and I knew Sheila wasn't there. But she's *always* there. For the twelve years I've had her she's never slept anywhere else when I was at home.

"She's probably gotten smart and gone down where it's cool." I thought. "And who's being a coward now . . . you or Milton Minor?"

I wished I hadn't thought of Milton Minor then, either. Dorothy's anxiety, her repeated insistence about whether he was here or not, flashed back into my mind with a new meaning. She knew who murdered Betty Livingstone and Joe Kramer. I didn't. I had no idea at all . . . not until then, and then I wondered. My mouth was very dry all of a sudden. I wondered if she was trying to tell me without telling me in so many words who it was that I was to watch for . . .

That was when I got up and went briskly—making myself be brisk because of the theory that you don't run because you're afraid, you're afraid because you run—over to the door. It was open. The hall had that shadowy half-light half-dark quality that familiar as it was made it look unfamiliar. I could have turned on the lights, but all the sinister bloodshot eyes searching the house from the black shadows of the shrubs in the back garden held more terror for me than the softer darkness that concealed me within it.

I knew the garden windows were locked. I knew the front door chain was up and the area windows shuttered and barred. I knew

Sheila was down there somewhere, because I could hear her tail thumping against wood. All I had to do was pull myself together like an adult intelligent woman, go down, and check up to reassure myself. If nothing else I could look out the garden windows and see for myself that all the shapes out there were stationary and friendly things, sinister only as apparitions of my own disordered imagination. So I started down, briskly again, or so I thought, but silently because I was in my bare feet and the stair rug was still down. I knew Sheila had heard me, because I could hear her long bony tail going thump-thump-thump.

Then I stopped. I didn't will to stop; I stopped because I was suddenly paralyzed into dreadful immobility. It was a metallic clink that I heard, and I knew it instantly. It was Sheila's tail hitting a loose brass ornamental handle on the second drawer of my desk. Was it then I remembered the telephone—the soft click of the receiver going down, and realized with a slow and creeping horror that it hadn't gone down, but come up as some one at my desk lifted the phone quietly and listened . . . listened to Dorothy warning me, listened to her telling me to go down and examine the garden windows again . . . and to my telling her that I was all alone? Was it then? Or was it just after that, when the board creaked?

It was the board just behind my desk chair that always creaked when I stepped on it. I heard it creak again, softly, and Sheila's tail chink the loose brass fitting again. And then I knew she didn't hear me. She was there in the sitting room with some one else . . . some one she knew well, or who knew her well enough to reassure her and keep her quiet with a hand on her smooth satin head. They were moving now. I could hear the whispering step rise from the board as it creaked again, and I was sick with a kind of awful nauseating terror as I stood on the stairs, too numbed to move or almost to breathe, waiting . . . waiting for the other board to creak, the board by the door that opened into the hall.

Then I heard it.

It seems like a nightmare I remember now, remote remembered horror that haunts me still. Then it was intense and stark and terribly immediate. I didn't want to die. I didn't want to go down into the dark abyss of eternity. I didn't want to leave the world in the mess it was in without ever knowing what happened . . . I didn't want to leave my two sons or leave Colonel Primrose out at Walter

Reed with the measles. Yet I was so numb I couldn't move. I knew I could make myself turn and run back up the stairs and lock the door and telephone—but there was no lock on the door. I knew I could scream. But I knew the velvet phantom steps creeping out of the living room would be far quicker than I was, because I was numbed with fear and they were alert with a fear far greater, the fear of guilt and retribution.

The board creaked again. The dim shadowy light on the broad oblong of the door seemed to move. Then it did move. The door was opening.

Then I screamed . . . "*Lilac! Lilac!*" But there was no sound—only a harsh whispered "*Lilac! Lilac!*" in my ears. I knew it was too late. No one in all the world could hear me.

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Then the door opened, and the hall light snapped on. In its blinding glare I struggled on the threshold of the dark abyss and sank . . . but only as far as the step behind me, shaken and shattered as I've never been before, but still, I believe, not half as shaken or nearly as shattered as Sergeant Phineas T. Buck. Galvanized, I believe the word is, and that's what Sergeant Buck was, for an appalled infinity that could have been an hour or a split fraction of a hair-breadth second. Then he was back in the living room again, his brassy voice speaking through a crack hardly wider than an eyelash.

He didn't go to frighten me, he said. He was there to protect me. "*Protect me!*" My teeth were chattering like a jungle full of monkeys. "*Protect me! For the love of heaven!*" I was half laughing, half crying, as near hysterics as I can ever remember, shaking so that my hand gripping the rail support rattled the whole banister. "You scared the living daylights out of me. I'll never be the same again."

I didn't stop to think that from Sergeant Buck's point of view that would be a desideratum par excellence. I would have gone and told him everything else I thought, just then, except that it's hard to conduct even a one-sided conversation through a blank closed door. I thought at first he was barricaded behind it because he'd taken off

his coat and necktie, and perhaps loosened his belt. I knew he was an extremely modest man.

"You'd better go back to bed, ma'am," the voice said through the crack in the door. "You'll catch cold, sittin' there like that."

Then the awful truth dawned. It wasn't Buck. It was me. I didn't have any clothes on—only a night dress, and at that a gossamer summer job that could have brought the blush of shame to a more hardened cheek than Sergeant Buck's. If I hadn't been so unstrung I think it would have been a pleasure to faint, or something, anything to smoke him out of his foxhole, just to see him a tarnished apoplectic shade of copper, not brass. But that was an afterthought. I'm afraid I didn't think of it till next day, when it was all too late.

"I'll go to bed when you go home," I said warmly. I'm happy to say I did think to add, "—What will the neighbors say?"

"Go to bed, ma'am," Sergeant Buck said coldly.

He pushed the door the rest of the way shut, indicating that the parlay was closed and the less said from then on the better. I relaxed, and when I thought my knees were strong enough I did as I was told. In a way I was grateful. I glanced out of the hall window into the garden. All the dark creeping things out there had miraculously disappeared. In short, I was really glad to have Sergeant Buck in the house. And it wasn't till morning that I remembered about the telephone, and a tinge of doubt began to color things.

Perhaps he was there to protect me. A little quiet wire-tapping on the side may have been entirely fortuitous. Nevertheless I found myself examining what I could recall of Dorothy's warning to me. There was nothing that a listener could construe as more than a reasonable fear of the phantom unknown. Her reference to Milton Minor was innocent, unless Buck had the same knowledge she had, and that I knew she had. What made me so confident that Buck hadn't more knowledge than either of us, I've no idea.

I could smell the ham and eggs and hot cakes Lilac was preparing for him, and hear her high delighted cackle as she acted as cook and hand-maiden, after she'd brushed me off with a soft-boiled egg and a sliver or two of dry toast. When I went down he was out in the garden. He threw his toothpick into the border and said, "Good morning, ma'am. Can I have words with you? There's some things here we got to get clarified."

The process of clarification left me confusedly in the dark where

I already was. Summed up, it reduced itself to the fact that Bill Kent was a high-charactered young man who was being hauled down that morning for what Sergeant Buck called Interrogation, and not expected to take it like a woolly lamb. Mrs. Hallet was a high-class lady but irregardless of that she was known to have slipped out the back door when the assumption was that high-class ladies when they left the house went by the front way. It was also known that she and Ellery Seymour had been on friendly terms for some time. In respect to Milton Minor, it appeared that he was a no-good hombre that a lady like me ought not to have around the house. The police had an eye on him. Sergeant Buck was telling me this for my own good and not because he personally, himself, had anything against Milton Minor. The fact that Milton wrote pieces for the papers was nevertheless, it seemed, only one of the many things against him. As for the rest of them, they were either high-class or high-charactered. In Sergeant Buck's opinion, the murder of Betty Livingstone, in spite of everything, was still what he had figured from the beginning, a cream passionell. The letters, furthermore, he said, might idemnify the man she'd taken up with.

"Letters?" I asked. "What letters?"

"The letters she'd been writin' her mother all these years," he said. "The old lady kept 'em. Lamb flew a boy out yesterday. He's bringin' 'em back this morning."

That seemed to be all, really, except the parting shot he gave me.

"I wouldn't do so much talkin', if I was you, ma'am," he said. "If I was in your place I'd be a whole lot more careful."

He started back to the house and stopped. I thought for a moment, from his expression, that he had a stomach-ache, from all my food he'd packed away, and was about to ask where was the bi-carbonate of soda. Instead he asked, "What time was you figurin' on goin' over to see little Mrs. Kent, ma'am?"

It was just emotion cracking through the glacial stratum of his rock-bound overlay.

"I wasn't," I said.

"I would if I was you. Kind of unofficial like. Poor little lady, she's goin' to take bad medicine this morning."

"All right," I said. She'd already been taking large doses of it. I started to say so, but since he'd told me not to talk so much I thought I might as well begin right then.

I kept that in mind, too, when the phone rang as I was getting

ready to go on my unofficial visit to the Hallet stables. It was the gifted biographer at the other end.

"What about lunch, Grace?" he asked. "I want to talk to you. There's hell to pay around Maison Stubblefield this morning. Seymour's blocking the rubber deal. E. B.'s about to have a stroke, roarin' and rarin'. I barged in on the row and got out *fast*. What are you doing today? Where you going?"

"I'm staying home, I think."

"Okay, I'll drop out some time," Milton said cheerfully. "What's new? Have you picked anything up this morning? Have you heard the dope on Joe Kramer? He was our Betty's boy friend."

"What? Joe Kramer?"

The letters, I thought, might have come and been read before Sergeant Buck had been let in on it.

"That's the scuttlebutt around the Press Club. They both got the works when somebody figured they were in on a fancy double-cross. I don't get it, myself, but I guess I was all wet. I guess the creative imagination done me wrong. I had a honey of a plot all worked out, but the deal's off, now Ellery's balking. I thought he'd have the gold pen out to sign that seven and a half million business on the line quick as he could. I don't get it, now. Do you?"

"I don't get anything," I said.

"Just a girl from the country, eh?" Milton said. "Okay, okay. I'll be seeing you."

But I didn't get it, and there was no use pretending I did. There was also very little use speculating about it. If Kramer was the "traveling man" of Betty Livingstone's unfinished letter I'd read in the Preston Hotel, it made sense in some ways but not in others. As for the rubber business, it was just as confused as it had always been. Maybe the checks Ellery Seymour had insisted on hadn't come through to his satisfaction. Maybe he'd found out by now that Susan Kent had double-crossed them and that Bill was not as malleable as he'd been led to believe. Maybe a dozen things that I had no way of knowing anything about. After all, seven and a half million dollars was not seven and a half cents, and as both E. B. S.'s agreed, it was Ellery Seymour's job to keep the Big Boss from going hog-wild before he reached the edge of the precipice and dashed headlong over it. That, in fact, as he pointed out, was what Mr. Stubblefield paid him for.

I didn't even tell Lilac where I was going when I left the house.

Only Theodore Hallet knew, because I met him as I went along the flagged path going unofficial-like to see Susan Kent. He was just coming away.

"I'm very upset, Grace," he said, which he hardly needed to do. "I'm trying to persuade Susan to let me call Frazier in for her. He's more than my attorney, he's a close personal friend, and he could advise her. She needs advice. But she's very stubborn, Grace. I don't know why women have to be so stubborn. See what you can do with her, Grace."

He started along to the house, and turned back.

"Oh, Grace. I think you and Dorothy ought to be very careful. You're both as stubborn as Susan is. You shouldn't have gone down to a place like that the way you did the other night. You should have taken me with you. You girls'll get into serious trouble one of these days. I think you'd both better pack up and go somewhere. You could go to Quebec—you'll be safe there. You could take Susan with you."

It wasn't a bad idea, as a matter of fact, I thought as I went on . . . I would personally be very glad to be in Quebec or any place else. And Susan definitely needed a change of scene. Or something. She was in the kitchen washing the breakfast dishes, moving slowly in a half-daze from the sink to the cupboard, her gay blue-checked apron a symbol of domestic felicity that her pale frightened face hardly bore out.

"They've taken him down to the police station, Grace," she whispered. "I don't know what he's going to do. He . . . he thinks I've been unfaithful to him."

"Haven't you explained anything by this time, Susan?" I asked patiently.

"I've tried to, but he won't let me. Every time I've tried he'd get up and go somewhere else. He won't listen. He says he doesn't want to know anything about it more than he knows already. He's hurt, really. That's what's the matter. He's trying to pretend he doesn't care."

She lifted the sink stopper and let the dish water run down the drain.

"I don't know what to do. He thinks I'm in love with Ellery Seymour, or something. It's something the Kramer man told him before he kicked him out of the house."

She turned on the water and washed out the sink slowly. "I don't know. Maybe if I just let him believe that, he'd never have to know the rest. I'm not sure it wouldn't be better."

"Not if Mr. Stubblefield buys a seven and a half million dollar rubber plant because he thinks Bill has the secret of a cheap synthetic, and expects Bill to go to work for him when he's out of the Government . . ."

I stopped. Susan had turned off the water and faced me, the pallor of her face intensified, her eyes reaching past me and fixed on something behind me in the doorway. I don't know what I thought was there, but for a quivering instant I know a phantom figure was in my mind again. At that, if I'd seen the cold muzzle of a gun as I turned around it wouldn't have appalled me as much as seeing Bill Kent there. He was standing calmly in the doorway, composed, and as obdurate as before.

"What's this?" he asked. "Go right on, will you, Mrs. Latham? I seem to have a gift for coming in on the most private conversations . . . always about myself."

Susan was holding to the dish mop with one hand and the sink with the other.

"She's been trying to tell you, Bill, but you know too much to listen," I said. "If you'll only give her a chance, she'll be glad to tell you."

His eyes rested on her for an instant. "Oh," he said. "We're back on that, are we? You never give up trying, do you, Mrs. Latham? But I'm not interested. All Susan has to do is tell the truth for a change. Captain Lamb's on his way in here now. Maybe you'd better leave your apron on. It makes you *look* domestic, whether you are or not."

Her hand moved slowly from the sink and pulled at the big blue checked bow behind her. "I don't want to look like anything I'm not," she said. She reached for my arm to steady herself. "I've already told them the truth. As much as I could . . . as much as had anything to do with this. I can't tell them any more."

I heard Captain Lamb at the front door. Susan's fingers tightened on my arm for a moment before she raised her chin, went forward past Bill in the doorway and out into the hall. I heard his voice out there—"Good morning, Mrs. Kent"—and he came on in. He went ahead of Susan into the living room.

"Now don't look so scared," he said, rather gently. "Your husband seems to be pretty well in the clear, from what I can make out now."

"He never had anything to do with any of it." Susan's voice was hardly more than a whisper. "I told you he didn't."

"But you wouldn't be the first woman who'd lied for her husband till she was black and blue and green in the face, Mrs. Kent, now would you?"

Bill Kent was lighting a cigarette, his eyebrows lifted. Of all the pig-headed, stiff-necked and wilfully blind young men I'd ever seen, I thought, he'd have taken the first and biggest prize, which if I were choosing it would have been a hefty kick where he'd have been sitting if he weren't standing semipropped up against the frame of the hall door. If this was an example of the scientific mind at work it was a wonder he had ever found out anything he didn't already know.

"All right, now, Mrs. Kent. I want you to begin again. You found that gun on the floor?"

"I found it," Susan said mechanically. "It was under the side of a chair in the library. I picked it up. I moved over behind the door . . . to look at it. Mr. Kramer thought I was going to shoot Mr. Stubblefield."

"But you weren't, of course?"

She shook her head.

"Then how do you suppose Mr. Milton Minor ever got the idea you were? He says he thought you were—looking at you from just across the hall at the bar."

She couldn't have become more pale, no matter what happened to her. She shook her head. "—Why didn't he try to stop me, or something, if that's what he thought I was doing?"

I thought there was a rather odd expression on Captain Lamb's face.

"I asked him that," he said laconically. "He was . . . a little evasive. However. He seems to think you go in for what might be called double-dealing all around, Mrs. Kent."

He hesitated a moment, glancing at Bill, and went deliberately on. "For instance, he said something about that green dress you had on?"

Dorothy Hallet had said Milton Minor was a louse, Sergeant

Buck had said he was a no-good hombre. I was trying at the moment to go on from there.

"It wouldn't be important, ordinarily, but there's some kind of a queer set-up here, Mrs. Kent, and I don't understand what you're doing in it. I just want to clear some things up. You rent here, I understand. How much do you pay for this place?"

"—One hundred bucks a month, Captain," Bill Kent said.

Captain Lamb nodded. "The rent is three hundred." He looked curiously at Bill. "You ought to know, Mr. Kent, that you can't rent a house like this, in Washington, D. C., on Massachusetts Avenue, for one hundred dollars a month. That's what I mean. Who pays the other two hundred to the Halletts?"

Susan Kent sat there silently, a kind of deathly stillness about her. Bill straightened abruptly. Even with hearing Freddie Mollinson, I thought, and with everything else, he hadn't realized a thing.

"This dress, now, Mr. Minor was telling me about. He says your husband said you paid seventy-five dollars for it. Mr. Minor fancies himself about such things. He says it cost two hundred, maybe two-fifty."

"Just a minute, Captain," Bill said quietly. He was no longer leaning against the door frame with casual detachment. He stood there cool and dangerous. "My wife doesn't have to answer either of those questions."

Lamb nodded. "She doesn't—not right now. She can get her lawyer and come downtown if she'd rather. I'm not inquiring into your private business for fun, Mr. Kent. You said you didn't have any outside income. I'm trying to figure how you can pay \$3600 a year for a house and \$200 for dresses and still eat. And when a girl like your wife starts aiming loaded guns at people, and then tries to toss the gun that's murdered a woman who's all tied up with these same people in the river, it's my job to ask questions."

He looked back at Susan. She wasn't pale any longer. Her cheeks were dull smoldering red. Her eyes were wide as she kept them fixed on Lamb.

"I've tried to tell my husband, and he won't listen to me," she said, steadying her voice with a painful effort. "I might as well tell you now, Captain Lamb, and maybe he'll listen too. It's a . . . a terrible thing—much worse than he thinks."

Her face was tensed and pale again.

"I sold Ellery Seymour the idea that my husband was . . . was working on the magic formula for cheap synthetic rubber and that he was such a . . . a great chemist that he really had it. That's where the extra money has come from. I . . . didn't want to have to leave Washington. The Stubblefield Enterprises have been subsidizing us almost ever since we've been here. I know it was wrong. I shouldn't have done it. It was all a . . . all a horrible lie."

The stable room was so silent that I could almost hear the ghosts of the old thoroughbreds stamping in their stalls. And it was a thoroughbred who'd just finished speaking, a thoroughbred with a small chin up and a pair of unflinching blue eyes that she turned from Lamb to her husband standing there by the door.

"That's what I've done, Bill. It's worse than you thought. I gave Mr. Seymour a lot of your work papers to prove what I said—the papers you brought home from the lab and left for me to burn up the next morning. That's what I've done. I promised him I'd persuade you to work for them, instead of going back to Ottawan. I've taken five thousand dollars a year from them, counting the extra rent, for three years now. I've got nearly thirty-five hundred of it left in the bank. I'll give them that back, and I'll borrow the rest from my father, and get a job to pay him back as fast as I can. You don't . . . you don't have to worry about it. It's my fault . . . I'm responsible."

The only reason, I'm sure, that they'd let her go on was that both Bill Kent and Captain Albert Lamb were too dumfounded to find any voice to speak with. I hadn't dared look at Bill until then. I had at Lamb, and he was as utterly flabbergasted, I'm sure, as he will ever be. And Bill was staring at her speechless, the incisive mind of the pig-headed scientist for once at least simply failing to function.

Then Captain Lamb found his voice.

"You mean, Mr. Ellery Seymour thinks your husband here has a formula he doesn't have . . . and he's paid you . . .?"

His question trailed off. He still stared at her uncomprehendingly. Susan nodded in silent affirmation.

Lamb got abruptly to his feet.

"What about this, Kent? Have you got this magic formula, or haven't you got it?"

The blood had rushed to Bill's face. He turned from Susan to Lamb with an effort.

"Don't be a fool," he said curtly, "Of course not. And Stubblefield couldn't buy it if I had. He hasn't got that much dough. He's nothing but a fourflushing charlatan anyway."

He turned abruptly back to Susan. He was angry still, but the bitter heat had boiled off. There was some curious quality about him as if he were angry now at just things, or circumstances, not at her personally any more.

"Get up, Susan," he said shortly. "Pack your stuff. We're getting out of this place. I'll find a place for you to go."

She made an obedient move to rise. Captain Lamb motioned her back, and motioned Bill to stay where he was.

"Just keep your shirt on," he said deliberately. "I'm not through here yet. I don't get this. I'm no scientist, but I don't get any of it. Mr. Ellery Seymour, now.—Could you have run on this formula, by any chance, not knowing you'd done it?"

"Oh good God, no!" Bill said. "All I'm doing is background stuff. I haven't got out past what everybody else has done so far. I haven't got the facilities, in the first place. And if I had done it, it wouldn't belong to me. I'm working for the Government of the United States—or I was till five minutes ago."

"All right, then. Take it easy son." Captain Lamb made a pacific gesture with one hand, pulled his chair up with the other and sat down again. "Now this Mr. Seymour. He's a chemical engineer, isn't he? He's got all the facilities he needs, hasn't he?"

"Sure."

"All right, then. What if your wife did sell him a bill of goods? He's a grown man, isn't he?"

Bill Kent looked at him for a moment.

"Sure. He's a chemical engineer. He's a grown man."

He seemed for a moment to be thinking about something entirely different, and to pull himself back from it.

"We're missing the point, Captain Lamb," he said more quietly. "I'm not concerned with Ellery Seymour, or Mr. Enoch B. Stubblefield, or any of the rest of them. The guy I'm concerned with is William Kent. You see, the stuff my wife's been selling doesn't happen to belong to me. I had access to it by virtue of my job. So, if you

don't mind, I'd like to run down and tell my chief about it. They say Stubblefield's putting up seven and a half million today to buy a surplus copolymer plant. If this is the reason, I don't want to spend ten years in a Federal penitentiary for fraudulent reversion of confidential information. Furthermore, I'd like to see my chief before anybody else does and the F. B. I.'s on my trail—if you don't mind."

He turned to Susan again. "You pack—and be ready to get out of here as soon as I get back."

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Susan Kent sat as still as death, making no sign she'd heard him. When the screen door shut she closed her eyes, wincing a little as if it had slammed to and struck her in the face.

Captain Lamb leaned forward and patted her hand, smiling sympathetically.

"Now we've got over that," he said kindly. "Now let's see where we are. You don't have to worry about your husband. He'd got witnesses to show where he was the times we're concerned with. What I want to know about is Kramer and that gun."

They went through all that again, only this time she told him about Kramer's two telephone calls Tuesday night. Then she showed him where the gun was pushed when Bill opened the door at three o'clock, so it was half-way to the wall where she'd found it in the morning. Lamb took his own gun out, went outside, closed the door and slipped it through the letter slot. Then he pushed the door open and came in. The gun slid quietly across the rug to about the place Susan had indicated as where the other one had been when she came down to get the milk Wednesday morning.

"I thought it was Mr. Kramer trying to plant it on me," she said. "I thought maybe he'd caught on to what I was doing . . . that there wasn't any formula, and he was trying to . . . I don't know what I really thought. All I could think about was getting rid of the gun before Bill saw it. I was frightened—not of them but of myself. I don't know. Maybe I did think if Mr. Stubblefield was . . . dead, I wouldn't ever have to face my husband with the truth. I didn't want Bill to know."

Captain Lamb patted her shoulder. "All right," he said. "All

right." I thought he was going to say, "Let it be a lesson to you," but he didn't. "It's better to tell the truth right out the first thing," he said. "You go on now and pack your things like he said. I want to talk to Mrs. Latham."

He closed the living-room door.

"I feel kind of sorry for that girl," he said when he came back. "It's going to be a long time before those two get together again. He's a stiff-necked son of a gun. Why doesn't he read the papers? She hasn't done any more than certain other people around here, that ought to know a lot better what they're doing than she does."

He looked at me oddly. "If Seymour was dumb enough to fall for that kind of line . . . You'd think he'd be a whole lot smarter than that, wouldn't you?" He gave me a bleak smile. "But my job's murder. I want you to read these."

He took a packet of letters out of his pocket. There were about a dozen of them, I guess.

"I gleaned these out of a couple of hundred that Betty Livingstone wrote her mother. Sit down and read them—see if you can figure anything out. You might notice something I've missed."

They appeared to have been written over a five-year period, beginning before our war started on December 7.

"These are the ones that more or less describe the man," Lamb said. "She never gives his name. She calls him Bunny. That's all she ever calls him. Bunny's home. Bunny's gone. This one's about where she first took up with Bunny."

I think on the whole the first letter of the lot was the most interesting. It was dated May 12, 1941.

"Dear Mother," it read. "A strange thing happened yesterday. I fell in love. On the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral when I stopped to look at the pigeons. I bought a new hat and came across 49th Street, and there was a man there. He was watching a pigeon that was off to one side all by itself, sort of droopy-looking, not trying to get the wheat an old lady was throwing the others. It looked very comical and forlorn. This man was watching him too. I laughed and so did he. He said 'That's the way I feel.' We got to talking and he asked me to go over to Rockefeller Center for tea. I said most people would have suggested a cocktail. He said I looked more like tea to him. Well, to make a long story short, Mums, I almost didn't make the theater. I don't know what happened to the time, and

neither did he. He stayed for the show and met me afterwards, and we went to a little Italian restaurant and ate supper. He was a lonely, sweet sort of person, awfully nice. You could see he'd had some sort of tragedy in his life, but he didn't say so. They put us out at two o'clock and we wandered up to the Park and sat talking until daylight, if you'll ever believe it. Then he took me home. I don't suppose I'll ever see him again, because he's an important person. You can tell that. But here I am supposed to be getting some sleep, and I'm in too much of a romantic dither ever to go asleep again. I hope I hear from him again, Ma."

The next was May 16th.

"Mother dearest—He's back! He was at the theatre tonight. He feels the way I do. He has to go away on business, but he's going to come back. I call him Bunny because he's really very sweet."

By the end of June she'd seen him several times.

"You won't approve, Mother, but it's all right. There are reasons he can't get married now, but we will be later. He's going to get me an apartment. He doesn't want me to stay where I am, and he wants me to quit the theatre and be a lady. He's not staying at the apartment, so don't get shocked, darling. I can't really believe he's as nice as he is. Companionship is all he wants. He's got a lot of big war contracts he's working on. When that's all over we're going to go somewhere together and settle down. We're going to have a farm out in the Frazier River valley."

I read on through them quickly. If their status was changed, she didn't tell her mother about it. They were all pretty much the same, in fact. Bunny was sweet and Bunny was kind. He was lonely when he came to New York and cheered up when he left. He was plainly an important figure of some kind, but Betty didn't ask him questions. She was happy and contented as it was. "I keep my fingers crossed, Mother. Sometimes I wonder about him, but I make myself stop at once. It's a wonderful feeling to know he needs me, so I don't care about anything else, really. He says he's always dreamed that some beautiful woman would walk up to him in the street and smile the way I did on the Cathedral steps. It's a funny kind of world, isn't it. I figure whatever it is, I haven't lost anything, and I've gained a lot."

Captain Lamb handed me the last letter of the batch. It was a little different.

"I don't think Bunny's tired of me, exactly, but he's got a lot on

his mind. He hasn't been home so much, lately, but he's awfully busy. I'm afraid I'll be an old woman by the time we get our farm in the Frazier River valley. He isn't married. I asked him again. I began to get sort of worried about that, because that's a game I don't play in. You can tell he isn't, of course. I guess I'm just getting a little tired of this kind of hidden life. I'd be glad of another chance like the last one to go on the road again. We never go out when he's here. Of course, he gets here very seldom; he's too busy. I asked him if he was ashamed of me, and wished I hadn't, because it hurt his feelings. He said he thought I understood he needed rest. I wish I hadn't been so irritable, because after all it's the same as it's always been, and I'm very lucky."

That letter was dated less than two weeks from the one I'd read in the Preston Hotel, the letter that Betty Livingstone had started on Sunday and had left unfinished when she died.

Captain Lamb was pacing methodically up and down the room, stopping occasionally to look at me. When I'd finished the last one and put it back with the rest, he said, "Well?"

I shook my head.

"No ideas, I'm afraid. She doesn't describe Bunny in any of them, or tell anything more about him?"

"Not a thing more than you've got there, Mrs. Latham."

"It certainly doesn't *sound* like Joe Kramer," I said.

Captain Lamb was annoyed. "*Kramer*? Why the hell did you think it would?"

"Milton Minor told me that was the scuttlebutt around the Press Club."

He shook his head.

"That man again," he said. "It could be a million people, but Kramer wasn't one of 'em. There were a lot of men with big war contracts in and out of New York. But Bunny sure hid himself. The Livingstone girl too. We can't get a lead up there. We've circulated her picture. Nobody seems to have missed her. Of course, she planned to go, so that would take care of the newspapers and milk bottles, if any. Maybe when the rent comes due we'll have a little luck. Probably he covered that up too."

He said it as if it actually didn't matter a great deal, but I had the uncomfortable feeling that a fairly bright amoeba ought to have known it was being microscopically observed.

"—And of course there's no special reason, at that, to think this New York affair's connected with anybody down here?"

He looked at me inquiringly, as if it wasn't impossible that without knowing it I had the key to that.

"I wouldn't know, Captain Lamb," I said.

"All right. You probably want to go along. I'm going to talk to that girl in there, now she's had time to think a few minutes. You wouldn't be dropping in at the Hallets', would you?"

"I might," I said. "Why?"

He smiled. "Just checking up, Mrs. Latham. Like to keep an eye on people."

In all my other adventures in the shadowy purlieus of criminal investigation, Colonel Primrose had been my liaison officer between the professional and lay-interest ends of what went on. I'd always assumed it was Colonel Primrose who really did the job. I suppose I'd actually thought, without so stating it, that now he was temporarily disabled, murder and rapine, whatever that is, would go on merrily, undetected and unavenged. It was beginning to occur to me that this was just another prop removed from under the theory of the Indispensable Man . . . or maybe Captain Lamb and Sergeant Buck had always been more important than I'd ever thought. Or maybe, of course, having no Colonel Primrose they functioned quite effectively without him. Having contented myself with sending him flowers and writing him a brief note of condolence, I had no idea that Lamb and Buck were in constant touch with him and that he'd been acting throughout as Mycroft Holmes to their Sherlock. And for fear any one may think I'm unsympathetic to the sick, I admit at once they may be right. Being like a dog myself, only wanting a corner to crawl off into until I'm well again, I was born with no touch of the Lady with the Lamp in my makeup. And anyway, my two children had had the measles, Lilac had had them, I'd had them, and I'd had all the measles I care about until I get to the point of having grandchildren who can properly have them. Adults with measles are slightly absurd, and I rationalized my inability to make custards and pat pillows and fuss around—the do you think you'd be more comfortable with the bed cranked up another inch and a half sort of thing—by taking it for granted that Walter Reed was competent to handle the matter, and that grown-up Army officers would be ashamed of having anything so ignominious as a lot of red spots anyway.

There's a time and place for everything, and the time to get measles isn't when you're in the middle fifties. Now, if Colonel Primrose had had gout, or pneumonia, or a coronary, my attitude would have been different, or I like to think it would. What I'm saying is, it never occurred to me that Captain Lamb had already showed him Betty Livingstone's letters—not knowing that since my experience with measles they are no longer regarded as communicable when the rash has appeared—or that Colonel Primrose was the one behind Sergeant Buck's theory of a cream passionell. Or, above all, that he could produce the startling idea that if Mrs. Stubblefield could be called Mutton, it was at least not inconceivable that Mr. Stubblefield, the One-Man Assembly Line, the Atomic Principle in Modern Industry, could, under cozy and intimate circumstances, be called Bunny, for mercy's sake.

Apparently the picture of domestic bliss the Executive Assistant for Public Relations of Enoch B. Stubblefield Enterprises painted of its Chief wasn't as impressive to Colonel Primrose, in his spotted solitude, as it was to all of us. I suppose he must have figured that if a woman calls a man Bunny he must have some aspect of a rabbit, and anybody who's seen *Harvey* knows a rabbit can be a towering six-footer. It made sense, I suppose, though I fear Mr. Enoch B. Stubblefield would have been appalled had he known that his picture was among all the rest being circulated around New York, along with Betty Livingstone's, to see if doormen, porters, landladies and real-estate brokers had any memory of a man who came occasionally to rest untrammelled from the rat-race of the world of affairs. Mutton would certainly have been upset—she would have been a dead sheep, or a very live one boarding the first plane for Las Vegas, Nevada.

The only person nobody thought of including was Freddie Mollinson. Freddie was *Out*. The idea of Freddie with a blond lady and a double life was as absurd as the idea of Colonel Primrose having a disease he should have had before he was ten and preferably at six or seven. Anyway, Freddie was still confined to his room, trying to think of a story to explain his exodus up the Halletts' back stairs. He wouldn't have shown his unhappy face in broad daylight long enough to go to the Preston Hotel and wield a blackjack to the eternal detriment of one Joe Kramer, even if by any horrible chance he might have crept out in the dark of the night to the boarding house on I Street.

It was reassuring to know that there was at least one person who could survey the ruins of his life and social status, when the story got from the Hallets' servants to other servants and thence to the drawing rooms, and not have to shiver at the grim specter of murder sitting on the top of them. Poor Freddie . . . he had enough to contend with without that. It was already creeping, as inexorably as ink spilled in the center of a white damask tablecloth, through the immaculate circles that Freddie graced. "My dear, what is this I hear about poor Freddie having a heart attack at Dorothy's the other night?" I'd been asked it four times myself the last two days, meeting people quite casually on the street. Flowers enough for a debutante party or a Secretary's funeral had poured into the precincts where Freddie lay with the shades drawn as tightly as if he'd been an Eighteenth Century duchess with the vapors.

I intended sending him some gladioli, but I hadn't got around to it yet.

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But all that was neither here nor there. It was murder I was concerned with . . . murder, and something else. And even that went out of my mind when I saw Dorothy Hallet. If I'd passed her on a crowded street I don't think I'd even have recognized her. She was up in her own sitting room, taking some papers out of an old walnut lace chest that stood on a table between two windows. She wasn't aware of me until I got in the room. She turned quickly, flashing around, her body concealing the open box. The relief that came into her eyes was almost as startling as the change in her. I don't mean she was haggard in the sense that I'd look haggard if I hadn't had any sleep and had the load on my mind that she had on hers. I'd look like an old piece of corrugated paper pulled out of a mudhole. She still had all her surface calm, after that first flash of anything but calm. Her face was still unlined. But everything else about her was diminished and drained off. She looked as if she'd lost fifteen pounds just overnight and all the tranquillity and repose she had was the result of a tremendous effort that took the most rigid and constant awareness to maintain.

"Oh, it's you, darling," she said. "Come in. I'm just clearing out my secret drawer."

Her attempt to reproduce the faint half-concealed smile that was part of her grave unruffled charm wasn't particularly successful.

"Have you ever seen it?"

She moved aside and indicated what had always looked like an ordinary paneled compartment when I'd seen it before. She had the panel in her hand now. What it concealed was two drawers with small but modern combination locks. One of them was still covered with an old ornamental brass disk that was released by the pressure of her thumb and forefinger. She smiled at me again as she turned the dial and pulled the drawer open. There was a packet of letters in it. She took them out, tore them one by one into narrow strips and dropped the strips in a silver bowl, already half full, until she'd destroyed the lot of them.

"Excuse me, dear, she said. She took the bowl and went into the bathroom. "I'm afraid a fire would look suspicious, in weather like this." I heard the john flush a couple of times, and a third, and she came back and put the empty bowl down on the table. "Just a precautionary measure," she said.

She fitted the panel over the drawers in the end of the lace box again.

"I guess I'm a peasant at heart. I've never trusted banks and safety-deposit boxes. I used to keep my love letters in here—before I had the locks put on it. It was my grandmother's idea. She said it was the only secret she ever kept from her family. I've kept it too."

She went over to the chaise longue and dropped into it, smiling at me. "Well. What's up? I see you're still alive."

"So far," I said.

"Theodore's gone down to his Headquarters. They've decided to go on with the paint job. At least I think they have. He's going to see Mrs. Stubblefield this morning, to see if she won't rescind her orders. There's nothing to stop them now, I guess. What do you know that's new?"

I told her about Sergeant Buck doing sentry duty, and then I told her about Susan's confession, and the letters Captain Lamb had. She listened, looking at the floor, not at me. At some point, I didn't notice quite which, she closed her eyes and rested her head back against the cushions, motionless, her face a quiet blank, completely immobile.

"It's a mess, isn't it?" she said casually, when I was through.

"Right," I said.

"Well, that's that. Now we relax and let Mr. Stubblefield cope with the rubber problem. I hope he does something in spite of Bill's failing to produce a miracle to order—not knowing he was supposed to be doing so. Well, it's very mean, but I'd like to see Freddie Mollinson do an honest day's work, instead of always complaining about the state of the natural rubber market. The only thing he had against the Japanese was that they took Burma and the East Indies and cut off his rubber dividends. He actually told me last year he'd written to Admiral Nimitz explaining that his back log wouldn't hold out more than three years and there was some need for haste. He always thought the New Deal provoked the Japs just on purpose, to put him in the bread line. It doesn't matter now, I guess. And they'll never find out who killed Betty Livingstone."

I was a little startled. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," she said.

I looked at her a long time. Then I said, "Dorothy, will you tell me something? It's none of my business, but I'd just like to know."

"As long as it has nothing to do with what I just said. I'll be glad to tell you anything else."

"Are you in love with Ellery Seymour?"

She didn't seem surprised or offended, only thoughtful.

"If you'd asked me that last week, I think I'd have said yes," she answered slowly. "I'm sure I would have. It's a strange thing. I'm not sure now—in fact I guess I'm sure I'm not. I'm just beginning to realize what it was. It was having somebody I could lean on, Grace. You know Theodore. He's always leaned on me, and I suppose I got tired. It was wonderful, having somebody who could make up his own mind and make up mine when I was bewildered about things. But I've never . . . what I mean is, there's never been anything but friendship between me and Ellery, if that's really what you're asking."

As she looked at me her smile seemed more genuine than it had before.

"In spite of all my friends, I'm an old-fashioned girl. But Ellery did supply an enormous lack in my life. His interest in me wasn't personal, in that sense. I think he's fond of me, but he's a very detached and self-sufficient person. He has something that carries him

on. We were both lonely, in a different way from the ordinary business."

She smiled at me again.

"I really don't know, Grace. It's a funny thing. I don't care what he does. I guess it's because you can't change patterns overnight. I'm used to looking after Theodore. It makes me angry to see them make Theodore make a fool of himself. I think that's it. You know, of course, that they're just using him. I don't dare tell him. I don't want him hurt. And it's not Mr. Stubblefield that's done it—it's Ellery Seymour. He first suggested it. Stubblefield's taken in as much as Theodore is."

She got up and went over to the window.

"I don't know how much you've seen of it, Grace, but—for some reason I don't quite know—this has all been a terrific build-up. Ellery's been building Stubblefield up brick by brick, letting him think he's God Almighty." She smiled a little. "It isn't hard to do, of course. But it's all one piece. I've watched it for years, without really seeing it until right now. I'm absolutely sure, now, that Ellery's really preparing him for the kill. I used to wonder. I asked him once how he could bear to sit there and let Mr. Stubblefield talk to him the way I wouldn't talk to a colored stable-boy, and Ellery just smiled. Sometimes I thought he hated him—there was something like an electric charge going through the room—but then I decided it was just because I'd have hated him if he treated me that way.

"But I was right, Grace. I realized it yesterday all of a sudden when he got that little twist at the end of his mouth and took Captain Lamb in to see Mr. Stubblefield. I knew something was up. I knew all the time he was pretending to hold Stubblefield back he was using the best possible technique of pushing him on. So with this Bill-Susan setup, it was a natural. Do you think that child sold Ellery Seymour a bill of goods? He'd hardly be fooled by Susan Kent, would he? He's been using her just as he's used Theodore. The bigger they come, the harder they fall . . . you know."

I don't really know whether I was going to say what she thought I was. She went on quickly.

"Why don't I stop him? Why don't I call Mr. Stubblefield and tell him not to throw away seven and a half million dollars on the biggest confidence game anybody ever played? I'll tell you, dear. It's

because I just don't give a damn what happens to Mr. Enoch B. Stubblefield. I want him to crash, *quick*—so it saves Theodore. Before Theodore's way out on a limb, the laughing stock of all Washington the way Freddie Mollinson's going to be, only worse because he's in a bigger game. I'm just being maternal, I guess."

Her smile disappeared as quickly as it came.

"They're not going to hurt Theodore, Grace. I won't let them do it. He's done something he thinks is big and important. He's not going to be a ridiculous sacrifice to Ellery Seymour's passion for revenge. It breaks my heart to see him."

She went back to the chaise longue and sat down on the side of it. There was nothing tranquil or poised about her then. Then gradually she sank back into her original mould. She looked up at me, her old smile rippling behind the surface of her dark eyes.

"So you see, dear, odd as it may seem to both of us, I guess it's Theodore I love. It's been a strange revelation to me, but that seems to be the way it is. What happens to any of the rest of them I don't much care. As for Ellery Seymour . . ."

She shrugged lightly. "He can play whatever games he likes. I don't really understand what he's doing. He may not know it, but he's a warm-hearted person and he's got a terrific New England conscience. Right now he's busy constructing himself some kind of a private hell. He'll suffer in it far more than any one else could ever possibly make him suffer. But that's no problem of mine. My problem's Theodore."

She looked out into a hazy indeterminate space. "It's funny, isn't it, to think that right now—this minute, possibly—the great Enoch B. Stubblefield is rushing headlong to his own ruin, with Ellery Seymour at his coat-tails pretending to hold him back, advising patience and caution and a little more time to consider . . . three red rags right between the bull and the precipice. It's wonderful, really. It takes patience. I guess Ellery's got all he'll ever need."

She smiled again, and looked calmly over at the telephone that was ringing on her desk. It rang again. She made no move to answer it, as I always do automatically, whether Lilac's in the house or not.

"I wonder who that is," she said. Then the buzzer sounded twice, and she took the phone up.

"Hello," she said.

Her whole body tensed sharply.

"No," she said. "No, E. B. Ellery isn't here. I haven't seen him this morning . . . No, I'm sorry . . . he isn't here."

I heard the phone crash and the dial tone zing as she held the phone abruptly out from her ear. She held it there several seconds before she relaxed and put it down. She turned deliberately around to me.

"I don't know," she said. "But I guess somebody's broken the good news. Mr. Enoch B. Stubblefield is very, very angry."

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"Mr. Stubblefield is extremely angry, in fact," she said quietly.

She was paler than she'd been before—too pale for any one who didn't care what happened to any of them except Theodore.

"I wonder where he is," she said absently. ". . . where he's gone. It must be awful for him . . . so near, and then to have it all blow up in his face like this. He must have thought he could count on Susan keeping her mouth shut. It was the one thing he could safely count on, you'd think, wouldn't you?"

I didn't answer that, and she wasn't asking me, actually. I did look at her with a kind of subdued dismay.

"Are you sorry, Dorothy? Did you really want him to . . ."

"To get away with it?" She shook her head. "I guess I must have. I'm not sure. It all depends. I've told you, Grace, it's Theodore I'm concerned about. Maybe all this will absolutely deflate him—Mr. Stubblefield, I mean."

She looked anxiously out the window, her face still pale. "I wish I knew where he was. It must be *terrible*."

I had the idea it was Ellery Seymour she meant now, not Theodore or Mr. Stubblefield. She broke off abruptly and glanced out into the hall. Adams was coming up the steps. We could see his gray head through the marble columns of the stair rail. She waited silently until he came to the door.

"Mr. Ellery Seymour is calling, ma'am. He's in the parlor. I told him I thought you were engaged at this time, ma'am."

I thought she was definitely paler now, but if she was it was so

subtle a change that it only made her seem a little more remote and self-contained. Still she didn't answer.

"Shall I tell him you're engaged, ma'am?" Adams said.

She shook her head. "I'll see him. Tell him I'll be down directly."

"Yes, ma'am."

She waited calmly until he'd gone out and we saw him going down the stairs again. Then she looked at me. I knew she was anything but calm. It was all habit, a mannered overlay to conceal the turmoil going on inside her. Her eyes were too bright and her nostrils quivering.

"You come with me, Grace. I don't like this. I'd rather he hadn't come here. I haven't anything to . . . to give him, and I don't want to see him . . . weakened. I'd rather he'd just gone away."

"Then don't see him, Dorothy," I said. "It's perfectly simple."

She shook her head quickly. "It isn't simple at all. I have to see him, now he's come. It's just that I don't want to see him . . . ignominious. I think it is. It isn't that I'm afraid to see him."

I thought it was an odd way to put it, but I went with her.

"Ignominious," however, wasn't the word. That was a fear totally without foundation.

He was out on the balcony, standing by the rail, his back to the long open windows, looking out over the green canyon of the Park. He turned when he heard us and stood there looking at Dorothy, very calmly, but with a strange kind of inscrutability that was hard to define, except that it had nothing in it of ignominy or failure. I thought he looked much less tense and tied up within himself, and much less the New England last Puritan sort of thing. He did look tired, depleted in a sense, like a man who'd been through a great emotional experience and needed rest. Not peace. Oddly enough, peace was the thing he seemed to have.

Dorothy, knowing him much better than I, sensed it far more immediately. She quickened her step abruptly.

"Ellery! What—"

As she reached the threshold of the balcony she stopped short, a quick and definite alteration in her manner. It was a good twenty-degree drop in the temperature.

"Hello, Susan. I didn't know you were here."

If Susan Kent answered I didn't hear her, nor did she do more than indicate by the mute appeal in the glance she gave me that she

was aware of my presence either. She was sitting in the reed chair that Enoch B. Stubblefield had occupied the day before, expansive over his julep and excited over Ellery Seymour's refusal to let him make his great announcement. She was as pallid as a young ghost, and very quiet.

"I brought Susan with me, Dorothy," Ellery Seymour said. "I know you won't mind, because she has to hear this as well as you. I'd like Bill to hear it too, but I couldn't get in touch with him."

Dorothy inclined her head a little and went to where she'd sat the day before.

"Mr. Stubblefield called a few minutes ago," she said. "He seemed rather cross. In fact he bellowed like an angry bull."

Ellery Seymour was silent for an instant. Then he said, "Good. I take it he's found out I was telling the truth—not selling out to a higher bidder."

"Has he bought the rubber plant?"

It was Dorothy who asked it, but Susan who caught her breath quickly.

"No. He didn't buy it. At least he hadn't when I left. He was calling Bill Kent at Rubber Reserve. I presume he got hold of him. He must know the facts by now."

"What are the facts, Ellery? I thought you wanted him to buy it."

Dorothy's face was as impassive as all the Orient. "I thought that was the way you'd . . . planned it."

He looked at her appraisingly for a moment. If he was taken aback I saw no indication of it, except perhaps that he didn't answer as promptly as he might have done. He seemed to be weighing every word carefully before he spoke.

"I did plan it—thoroughly and minutely—over a period of years," he said at last. "All I had to do was wait till the chance came, and this was it. He couldn't resist the flamboyant and spectacular. He's always believed that two emotions are the mainsprings of human activity—vanity and cupidity, pride and greed. Because he's ruled by them, he thought all other men were. And because he's ruled by them, it wasn't very hard for me to use them. I couldn't have got this far if he hadn't been blinded by them, and by his own stupendous ego. It was all incredibly simple."

"But you didn't go through with it?" Dorothy asked, when he

stopped and looked away into the leafy green distance again. "Why did you stop?"

"Why?" He repeated it without shifting his gaze. "Why did I stop? Because it didn't make any difference to me any more. It's a curious thing. I got up this morning with an extraordinary sense of triumph and elation, and I went to his rooms ready to finish the job. I can't say precisely what happened, but something did. When I saw him there at his desk, when he got up and came over and slapped me on the back, on top of the world . . ."

He moved his hands in a quick gesture, and shrugged.

"Something happened to the structure I've built up, brick by brick, painstakingly, day after day, year after year. It crumbled to the ground. I hadn't any desire to use it for the purpose I'd built it for. I had no emotion about it. I wasn't sorry. I wasn't glad. I simply didn't care any more. His arrogance and his greed simply didn't disturb me. I told him to tear the contracts up and put them in the wastebasket. I told him there was no magic formula for creating rubber out of skim milk for a fraction of a cent a pound. I told him it was a lie, made up out of whole cloth. I told him a great many things. I didn't tell him the one thing that's been behind every move I've made since I've known him. That's neither here nor there."

Ellery Seymour stopped for a moment. Then he said quietly, "He didn't believe me at first. He said I'd never have risked losing my money as well as his. He . . . he didn't understand. He accused me of having sold out to somebody else. But that didn't matter either. I suggested he call Bill Kent. Then I left. I walked up here. It's the first time I've walked in the streets a free man for many years."

Dorothy watched him, quietly and intently. Susan had let her dark head rest back against the gray-and-yellow cushion behind her and sat with her eyes closed. There was no relief in this for her. She must have been thinking of Bill when Mr. Stubblefield called him, hunting the truth that he wouldn't believe when Ellery Seymour told it to him.

"I've been rationalizing my own . . . psychosis for many years," Ellery Seymour went on, after a moment. "What it is isn't important, now. But I think if Stubblefield hadn't for years reminded me, every time we were in public together, of the time I came to him, half-starved and down at the heels, and Mrs. Stubblefield hadn't always brought up the fortune teller who saw my initials in the

stars, or the teacup or whatever, I might have forgotten. It's hard to say. I think I'm not basically vindictive. I became so through . . . something that happened in my own life."

I thought for a moment that he'd tell us the story the engineer had told at lunch that day, about his wife and child and unborn baby. But he didn't. He let that rest.

"I think perhaps what happened to Betty Livingstone, whose father was one of Stubblefield's victims, as her mother and herself are because of him, and what happened to Kramer, probably affected me more than I knew," Seymour said. "I didn't like Kramer. I didn't know he had a man following me. I knew he followed me himself when I left the hotel after the Stubblefields had gone to bed and went out to the Preston Hotel to find Betty. He followed me later, when Theodore called me and told me where she was, and I went over to the I Street house to find she was dead."

I couldn't help moving a little. A chill draft of air seemed to come through the window behind me, and creep across the back of my neck and down my spinal column. Ellery Seymour looked over at me for an instant.

"I hired Betty Livingstone of course, to haunt the Stubblefields," he said quietly. "I never saw her. I only knew she was Bertha Taylor's daughter and in the show business. I talked to her over the phone. She didn't know who I was. All she knew was that we both hated Enoch B. Stubblefield. She was delighted with the idea of making him uncomfortable. Madame Tigane, Mrs. Stubblefield's present supernatural adviser, was delighted to make an extra few hundred dollars predicting Bertha Taylor's appearance from time to time. Cupidity and vengeance seemed to be the emotions that made that work so beautifully. Except that I didn't plan for Betty Livingstone to come here. I talked to her over the phone at the Preston Hotel. She was to appear at the Stubblefields' hotel, not here. I was as astonished as any one when she came. I thought later it might have been Kramer's idea, but I suspect now it was hers. Kramer had obviously begun to put two and two together when he heard me ask for her at the Preston. I think he must have gone up there the next day, thinking he might pick up some information she'd left behind before she went to I Street."

"—It would have been very awkward for you if he'd found it, wouldn't it?"

It was me that said that, before I realized what I was saying, and before I caught the blank horrified look in Dorothy Hallet's eyes as she turned her head quickly away. It was tantamount, of course, to accusing him, if not actually of their murder, of a compelling motive for it, anyway. I wished I hadn't said it. As he looked at me I felt the cold chill again. There was something terribly appraising and very still in the way his level gaze was resting on me. I moistened my lips quickly. I didn't seem able to speak unless I did, because my throat was dry too.

"I mean . . ."

"I know what you mean, Mrs. Latham. You mean precisely what you said. And you're right. It would have been extremely awkward at that time, when I was still carrying out my plan. It would have been infuriating to madness. And you can go on from there. You can say the reason I gave up this morning was that I'd already been through an emotional catharsis. Having murdered two people, I'd got all the tension out of my system—I could afford to let Stubblefield off and save my money. Perhaps, Mrs. Latham, I thought it was safer not to go on with the police already on my trail. Above all, Mrs. Latham, you could certainly say that with Betty Livingstone alive, recognizing me, possibly, and Kramer suspicious enough to follow me to the hotel, they were very dangerous to me indeed. I'd be the last person to deny that, since it seems to be my day to tell the truth."

"—I don't think she meant that, Ellery," Dorothy said quickly. "It was just an idea that popped into her head."

"No doubt," Ellery Seymour said coldly. "I trust it doesn't pop into anybody's else's head—and that she doesn't plan to produce it as a theory for Captain Lamb."

The cold chill down my spine had turned to splinters of ice pricking sharply along it. He was looking at me, smiling a little. If there was any warmth in the smile I failed to detect it.

"It would also be hard to prove, Mrs. Latham," he said casually. "I don't often—"

It was then that the telephone rang, cutting him off, and Dorothy rose abruptly, Dorothy whom I'd hardly ever seen answer a phone if it was six inches from her hand. She went quickly into the drawing room and opened the Chinese cabinet. I heard her say "Mrs. Hallet speaking," as Ellery Seymour abandoned whatever it was he

was going to say he didn't often do, and turned to Susan Kent. "I'm sorry I ever got you involved in any of this, Susan," he said. "That's all the apology I'm going to make. I'm afraid I didn't think very highly of you to begin with, and I wasn't particularly concerned with how much you might suffer in my plan. I thought you were just another ambitious woman trying to force a good scientist into the money market. I may even have thought the sooner he caught on to you the better off he'd be."

Susan sat forward. "You don't have to say all that, Ellery. It was my own fault. And if I'd had any sense, I'd have known I couldn't fool you. But you don't have to go on. I don't count any more. And I'll pay you back—"

Ellery Seymour shrugged. "You earned all you were paid."

"But Bill—"

She had just spoken his name when Dorothy's voice, intense with some unknown shock and horror, came through the open window.

"Oh, it isn't *possible*! I don't believe it! And Bill Kent . . . it isn't *possible*!"

Susan was on her feet in an instant and running into the drawing room. She must have tried to take the phone from Dorothy's hand. I heard Dorothy's sharp, "Stop it, Susan—don't be a fool!" before she turned back to the phone. "I'm sorry," she said breathlessly. "—Go on." She listened in silence. Then I heard her say, "Oh, my God!" and she was silent again. At last she said "All right," and the phone clicked back into place.

"Go on back, Susan, and sit down," she said then.

"What is it?" Susan said frantically. "Tell me—what's the matter with Bill? What is it?"

"Come and sit down and I'll tell you. There's nothing you can do."

They came back out on the balcony, Dorothy holding on to her arm. Her face was absolutely colorless. I'd never seen her look the way she did.

Ellery Seymour got up. "What is it, Dorothy?"

She shook her head and pushed Susan back into her chair. She looked even more distraught than the white-faced girl she was trying to make be calm. When she turned to us I thought for a moment she wasn't going to be able to speak.

Then she said, very quietly, "Mr. Stubblefield has been shot and killed. They have arrested Bill Kent for his murder."

27

The sharp swish-swish, swish-swish of the stream of cars crossing the Massachusetts Avenue bridge sounded loud enough, in the silence in which we sat for a moment, unbelieving but appalled, to have been in the Hallets' vestibule.

I don't remember much about that exact moment, except that Susan Kent sat absolutely motionless, and that Ellery Seymour stood staring at Dorothy, completely stunned, and then sat down abruptly, his face gray as ashes. His lips were working, but if any sound came out of them I couldn't hear it. His body twitched as if a series of electric shocks were going through it. He was totally unnerved and shattered.

"Stop it, Ellery, and Susan—both of you," Dorothy said. "Stop it, and listen to me. It's all crazy about Bill. It doesn't make sense—it *can't* make sense! Susan—pull yourself together! He couldn't have killed Mr. Stubblefield. Listen to me. Let me tell you what Milton Minor said."

"Milton Minor!" I said.

"Yes, Milton Minor. He was at the hotel. He was in the lobby when Bill came. Bill's a hot-headed fool . . . oh, God, he's a fool!"

She made a despairing gesture.

"He asked for Mr. Stubblefield's room number and they wouldn't give it to him. Then he asked Milton. Milton thought he looked sore, but not crazy, and not dangerous. He told him. The house detective tried to stop him, but Bill got into the elevator and went on up. That's all anybody knows. The detective took the next elevator. Bill was in Mr. Stubblefield's room, and Mr. Stubblefield was dead—shot through the heart. Bill said he was dead when he got there. They arrested him anyway. But he didn't have a gun. There wasn't a gun anywhere. Don't you see how ridiculous it is? You can't shoot people unless you've got a gun. So please, stop it—both of you!"

But Susan got to her feet then. "I've got to go, Dorothy. I've got to go and see him."

"They won't let you—"

"Yes, they will. They have to—I've got to see him!"

She shook off Dorothy's hand and went quickly out. Ellery Sey-

mour made a half-dazed move to rise, to go with her, I suppose. She heard him and turned back.

"I want to go alone. I don't want anybody with me."

She ran on then, through the drawing room. Dorothy put her hand on Ellery's arm.

"Sit down. Let her go. She'll be better off alone. I'd rather be. Please sit down."

He sat there, still speechless. She looked at him with an expression that was an odd mixture of compassion and bewildered anxiety. Then she put her hand softly on his shoulder.

"You didn't really hate him as much as you thought, did you?" she asked gently. "You only thought you did."

She went over to the balcony rail and stood there with her back to us, her hand on the white painted pillar, looking out over the Park, shaking her head a little before she rested it for a moment on her hand on the pillar. No one could tell what was in her mind, of course, but I wondered. If Ellery Seymour *had* killed Betty Livingstone and Joe Kramer . . . But he couldn't have killed Mr. Stubblefield. Even if he'd come in a taxi, and hadn't walked, as he said he did, from their hotel to Dorothy's house. Mr. Stubblefield had been alive, talking to Dorothy, when he must have been in sight of the house in either case. And there was no possible doubt that he was really shattered now. He couldn't have feigned such utter shock if he'd been the greatest actor of all times.

"—Mr. Mollinson, ma'am."

The contrast of Adams' polite voice in the drawing-room window announcing the arrival of Freddie Mollinson at that point was a descent from tragic suspense to comedy on such a reduced plane that I don't think any of us believed our ears until we saw Freddie Mollinson in person. None of us, certainly, had heard Adams come in. Dorothy turned, startled, the color rising for the first time to her cheeks that day.

"Oh," she said. "It's you, Freddie."

"It's I, Dorothy," Freddie said. He nodded to me and to Ellery Seymour, who hardly seemed aware he was there.

"This isn't a social call," Freddie said. "I think I should tell you that, Dorothy, and tell you that I never expect to come to your house again. It is a matter of business that brings me here this morning."

At any other time Dorothy would have thought of a dozen things to say, but she said none of them now.

"I'm sorry, Freddie."

"It's Mr. Seymour that I wish to see."

I looked at Freddie with considerable interest. For any one who'd taken to his bed and his bottle of smelling salts, he looked amazingly fit, and just as pompous and well-fed as ever.

"Self-preservation is the first law of nature," he said. He paused to let that eternal dictum sink in, a dandified Socrates believing that men seek the truth, and have only to recognize it to see that truth is what it is indeed. I stared at him, not believing I'd heard him.

"If you've come with a bag full of platitudes, Freddie," Dorothy said, "you can take them home at once, please. We haven't time or any desire to listen to them now."

Freddie's face flushed. "I was stating my position," he said stiffly. "You don't understand that if Mr. Seymour's scheme goes through, I am going to be penniless."

His voice rose, a little shrill. "You haven't fully understood that, Dorothy."

"Perhaps not." Her eyes were beginning to smoulder with dark velvety fire. "Perhaps it doesn't interest me, Freddie. Don't forget that I've been a good friend of yours, in my way, for a long time. I'm willing to go on being one, up to a point. But not past it. Perhaps you haven't heard that Bill Kent is in jail."

Freddie Mollinson's face lighted with the light of malicious satisfaction. It was an instant reaction that he couldn't have controlled if he'd wanted to. But it died as quickly as it came.

"—For the murder of Enoch B. Stubblefield," Dorothy said.

That was when it died.

"And don't tell me," she went on evenly, "that you didn't know Mr. Stubblefield was dead, Freddie."

I saw that that was exactly what Freddie had planned to do. He turned that odd sort of pea-green soup color. I wondered if he was going to have another one of his heart attacks. He stammered like it.

"I . . . well, I do happen to know it, Dorothy. I heard it in the taxi, on the radio, coming over."

"I'm sure you did. And I'm sure you heard about the murder of Joe Kramer on the radio in your bedroom. Didn't you?"

The gray tinge of his sleek jowls was grayer still.

"No . . . no. I . . . I didn't have the radio on. I read it."

She looked at him silently for an instant.

"Because you weren't in your room, were you, Freddie? And don't bother to lie to me. When Waters gets on the witness stand, he's going to forget your orders. He's going to remember *I* called you up at exactly half-past twelve and you weren't in your room."

Freddie's gasp was like that of a fish too long out of water and his eyes bulged.

"I . . . was out for a very few minutes, Dorothy . . . I had to see my broker. I'm selling rubber. I can't afford the risk in . . . You can't do this to me, Dorothy!"

"You'd be surprised what I can do when I put my mind to it, Freddie," she said, very quietly. "Listen. I know you carry a gun. I know you wouldn't dare use it unless there was somebody else to take the blame. You wouldn't like to go to court and prove it, would you, Freddie? A lot of things would come out that you wouldn't like out. In fact, Freddie—"

She came across the balcony from the rail and stood behind her chair, both hands gripping it tightly.

"In fact, Freddie, I think I'm not going to be a friend of yours any longer. I don't like you, and I know now I never have. Every time I've seen the name of a boy I knew on the casualty lists I've thought 'He's dead so Freddie Mollinson can go on eating pressed duck and making cracks about his hostess's lousy wine.' That's what I thought, Freddie. And I think I'd be doing a service to humanity to let them hang you by your neck until you're somewhere else, not here."

He braced himself against the window frame, staring at her, the veins of his eyes red cobwebs around a pallid frightened iris. He was shaking in his polished boots, the horror of what she was saying washing him like surf battering a chip of wood. Ellery Seymour had sat up and was looking at him silently, a cold and unholy light in his eyes.

"I mean every word of it, Freddie. If Bill Kent or anybody else is brought up for murder, and maybe even if they're not, I'm going to have you arrested, Freddie. I'm going to tell the police that you read the note that girl left me. You could have, couldn't you, Freddie? And I think the Kelly woman will be able to identify you. Because

you didn't go home right away, did you, Freddie? Adams called your house twice to see how you were, and you weren't at home. You were——"

Her dark eyes, shining with anger, shifted from Freddie's cowering figure and traveled through the open windows. The anger died in them, slowly, and in its place came something else, something that I couldn't understand or hope to define. Her hands gripped the chair back more tightly, and she caught her breath and held it for a moment, all the color draining from her face again.

I looked around sharply, and relaxed at once. It was just Theodore. But I shouldn't say that, and I understood at once, I thought, what she was feeling. Because he was a tragic Theodore. He'd heard the news. His great white hope was dead.

He had more dignity about it than I would have thought he'd have, if I'd thought of him at all when I first heard the unbelievable news that Mr. Stubblefield was dead. He came across the drawing room still sort of dazed and a little blank, as any one would be with a grandiose but beautiful dream nothing but a handful of dust and ashes. It must have been the way Mr. Stubblefield had felt, a moment or two after Ellery Seymour broke the staggering news to him that his grandiose if not beautiful dream was nothing but fraud and chimera. But Mr. Stubblefield and Theodore were different people, of course, and Mr. Stubblefield's mighty wrath bellowing over the phone in Dorothy's room would of course be different from Theodore's still dazed but dignified acquiescence.

As he came up to us he was looking at Dorothy, and he didn't seem to notice, even, that any of the rest of us were there.

"Dorothy," he said. "—Mr. Stubblefield is dead. He won't ever be President of the United States."

No one spoke for a moment. Then Dorothy said, "I know, Theodore."

He drew his hand across his forehead in a tired gesture.

"He . . . he said he'd rather have you running his campaign than me. He said I wasn't fit to polish your shoes. He told me he was just letting me get the headquarters ready, and my fancy friends with a lot of money to spend and no brains to spend it with lined up, before he kicked me out and got somebody fit to run the show. He said with me running his campaign he couldn't get elected to the poorhouse. He . . . he called me a little squirt."

Dorothy Hallet started quickly to speak, but he raised his hand to stop her.

"—I wanted to tell you first, Dorothy. I'm glad I killed him. He might some day really have been President."

28

It had been like an atomic bomb dropped in our laps when Dorothy said Bill had been arrested for the murder of Enoch B. Stubblefield. Theodore's simple statement should have been terribly worse. But it wasn't. It was—like a simple unchangeable

fact that we held in our hands.

Theodore was still seeing only Dorothy. She had relaxed her grip on the chair, her eyes on him, great moving eyes, liquid with compassion.

"This is the gun I did it with." He took a revolver out of his pocket and laid it on the arm of the chair. "I've called the police. I called from downstairs as I came in. I wanted to tell you first, Dorothy. I'm glad I killed Stubblefield. I'm very sorry about the others. I didn't want to kill Betty, because she was a sweet girl, in her way. I didn't love her, Dorothy. I've never loved anybody but you. But I could pretend I was a great man to her. You knew I wasn't. I thought if I did something—like spearhead a popular movement for Mr. Stubblefield for President—you'd see I was better than you thought. But of course, he was right. It was . . . absurd, like everything."

"Oh, Theodore . . ." She started toward him, her eyes blinded with tears.

He took a step backwards. "I'm not fit for you to touch, Dorothy," he said. He went on evenly. "I wouldn't have killed Betty, but of course she'd discovered who I was. She hadn't known my name, before. I didn't recognize her, but she whispered to me just when she was going. She told me where she was staying that night and to come and see her. I was desperate. I was afraid she'd tell you. I told her to wait, some way, and I went upstairs and got the gun in your desk. I was going to . . . to see her outside, and threaten her. But she was gone when I got down. And there were people in the library. I just slipped the gun under the chair where Susan found it

And I didn't mean to kill her, then, until she said she'd left a note for you. She said I'd never be a public figure, Dorothy; she'd *haunt* me the way she did Mr. Stubblefield. I had to kill her. I didn't want you to know."

The swish-swish, swish-swish of the cars on the Bridge was in the room with us again.

"You see, I thought you were really in love with Ellery here, and I didn't want to lose you. Of course, if you and Grace had seen me in the closet I wouldn't have harmed either of you. And I didn't want to kill that young man, but I had to get rid of the wig and the black dress, and he was in her room at the hotel when I went there to take them back. I knew she was at that hotel. I'd had a letter from her, in my box downtown, saying she was going to be there. I went to see her Sunday. I didn't think she'd find out who I was. But it made me nervous. I wasn't nervous about Mr. Stubblefield coming, the way you thought I was, I was afraid she might see me on the street, and find out."

As he brushed his hand slowly across his forehead again, looking with a kind of pitiful helplessness around the room, I saw why the girl had called him Bunny.

"You can tell the police they don't have to hunt the apartment any more. It was at the Ridley-Plaza where I've always had a room. I suppose they didn't think to look in a big hotel. But that doesn't matter. It started when you were in California, and I was lonesome. It never meant anything to me, and I was always ashamed of it, but I couldn't seem to find any way to break it off without a scene. But I've got to go now and get a fresh shirt."

He started to turn away, and stopped. "I want to thank you for a lot of things, Dorothy, but especially for the last two days. You knew I'd done it. I mean, you knew I'd killed both those people, didn't you?"

She nodded. "Yes. I knew, Theodore."

"I thought you did. I . . . I've wondered how you knew?"

Her voice was unsteady. "Because you weren't in your office at the headquarters, Theodore. It was me the detectives saw through the frosted glass, sitting there. I came in the back way, to avoid all the people. I thought we could have lunch together. Your coat was propped up in the chair. I moved it and sat down and waited, till nearly half-past one. I didn't think of it until in the night. Then I

realized that they couldn't tell, from outside. And then I . . . I remembered other things. Your dinner jacket was wet, the night she was killed. I took it to the tailor's to get it out of the house. And I remembered her name, Theodore."

She looked away from him for a moment.

"There were some letters here . . . when I flew up from Florida and you weren't expecting me to stop off at home. I was hurt, and angry, and I kept them to use when I got a divorce. But I haven't ever really wanted a divorce, Theodore. I forgot all about them until the name Betty came up, and then I remembered. I destroyed them this morning, when I began to understand myself . . . and you."

She looked back at him. "Oh, Theodore, something will happen . . ."

He stood there, transformed for an instant with a sudden kind of radiance shining from his face. It was very moving, and terribly pathetic, as it died slowly as he remembered again. That was the tragedy of Theodore. Nothing that could have happened to him thereafter could have reached the same height, or the same depths. He knew she loved him, but he knew it too late. The sands had run too low in the glass, the shadow of a broken commandment was already too dark and terrible across the path of life he trod.

"I must go now and change my shirt," he said, "and be ready when they come."

Dorothy moved quickly forward.

"Don't come with me. I'll be down directly. I won't be but a moment."

He paused again. "And tell Susan I didn't mean to . . . involve her by putting the gun in the hall. It was just the easiest thing I could think of to do. I . . . I couldn't think."

He went into the drawing room. Dorothy stood there, her hand on the back of Ellery Seymour's chair. None of us moved. There was nothing we could say or do that could have any meaning to her. The balcony was utterly silent except for the soft swish of the cars crossing the Bridge, and a blue jay screaming a raucous note in the feathery branches of the Chinese Scholar tree on the terrace.

A door closed, somewhere in the house. We stayed there motionless, waiting, the seconds dragging by. Dorothy moved suddenly then, her face bloodless, and went quickly across the drawing room.

Ellery Seymour followed her, and I followed. She was running, then, up the marble stairs towards Theodore's room, the two of us following her and Freddie Mollinson, still unnerved and yellow-green, coming behind.

She ran through her sitting room to the door leading to Theodore's apartment, put her hand on the knob and tried it, and looked back, white-faced, at us. Ellery Seymour motioned her aside, picked up a chair and smashed it into the door, again and again, until the panel gave. He reached in, turned the key in the lock and threw the door open. The room was empty. Across it was the closed door to Theodore's bathroom, and the silence that came from behind it told its story.

Seymour turned back.

"Don't, Dorothy," he said quietly. "Take her away, Mrs. Latham. Take her in the other room."

She came unsteadily back with me into her sitting room and sat down, and I turned, as I wish I had not, and saw Ellery Seymour go across the room and open that door. It was just for a terrible fleeting instant that I saw, reflected in the mirror on the back of the door swinging slowly open, the image of Theodore, hanging motionless from the metal rod around the tub, from the black scarf knotted around his throat. I suppose my hand on Dorothy's shoulder must have tensed. She looked quickly up at me, drew a long quivering breath and gripped my hand tightly.

"It was better," she whispered. "It's horrible, but it's better, for him."

Her face settled slowly back into the grave and tranquil mask she wore to hide the turmoil raging in her heart. Then she got up, as we heard the footsteps outside, and went over to the door.

"My husband is here, Captain Lamb," she said. "Will you all be very quiet, please."

Lamb came in with a couple of other men I didn't know. Sergeant Buck wasn't with them.

29

"Of course she's always looked divine in black. But I suppose she'll think it old-fashioned to wear it."

Freddie Mollinson said that. We were downstairs in the drawing room, reduced to silent gnomes huddled unconsciously into a small close group in front of the fireplace—Ellery Seymour, Freddie, Bill Kent and I. Dorothy was still upstairs with Captain Lamb and the medical examiner they'd sent for immediately. Bill had come with Lamb, interrupted by Theodore's last call as they were in his office.

At first I don't think of any of us heard what Freddie said. Then, as the heartless enormity of it seeped into our numbed brains, we all looked at him. He looked back at us, trying to keep up his pose of indifference to anything that unsettled the pleasant functioning of his own ego. But he couldn't take it. He couldn't take what he saw in the three pairs of eyes turned on him. His face turned that odd color again and his superiority crumpled and fell apart. "I'm . . . I'm sorry," he said. "I . . . didn't mean that. It's just . . ." He didn't go on. He was crying. There was something unnatural about the tears on those mottled cheeks. He got blindly to his feet and took a couple of steps toward the door. He stopped for just a moment. "Tell her . . . I'm very sorry. Tell Dorothy I'll be at home, if there's anything she ever wants me to . . . to do for her."

Seymour and Bill Kent had both turned away before then, and then he was gone.

"I wouldn't want to be that guy," Bill said. "I wouldn't want to live with myself every day, if I was him."

"I don't like to think of living with myself," Ellery Seymour said quietly. "If it hadn't been for me, none of this would have happened." He got up. "You're staying, Mrs. Latham? She'll need you here."

He looked at Bill. "Good-by," he said. "I hope you'll try to understand that Susan meant all right. She didn't know the deck was stacked against her. She was just trying to do her best for a guy she thought was bent on hiding his brilliant lamp under an out-of-the-way bushel. She thought she was on a straight road. She didn't know the difference between appearance and reality."

He turned to me. "Good-by, Mrs. Latham. Tell Dorothy I'll be back. I've got to go see Mrs. Stubblefield now."

Bill Kent sat there hunched forward in his chair. "Where is she, Mrs. Latham?" he asked after a while.

"She went down to the jail to try to see you," I said. "I don't know where she is now."

I thought he'd do something then, start being implacable once more or get up and hunt her, but he didn't.

"I guess I was a damned fool," he said at last.

"That was the impression I got," I said. "It practically struck me in the face."

"Okay."

He looked down at his feet a moment.

"I guess she won't think I'm so hot any more, and she's right. I just never thought much about anything but myself. I never thought about her when we came here. I was out all day and went to the lab every night. She never griped about it. If I'd stuck around a little more, these chisellers would never have got their hooks into her. Who the hell am I to tell her she's got to go back to Ottawan? She didn't even have a kid to give her something to do. I thought my job was more important than the human race. Well, I guess she'll find some guy that'll stick to her when she's in a mess, instead of going holy on her like a bloody self-righteous fool. Dorothy's a better guy than any of us—she stuck when the going was really tough. I guess Susan's well shut of me."

I didn't say anything, and he got up.

"There's no use in me sticking around here."

He looked like a hundred acres of the Dismal Swamp.

"I'll go on home. Tell Dorothy I'll be over there if she wants anything done that I can do. She's about as swell as they come. Will you tell her?"

I nodded. He started across to the door, but before he got there it opened. The large granite façade of the missing Sergeant filled it like something moved from a pedestal in a main square and planted oversized in an undersized niche in the town hall. I thought he looked more lantern-jawed and fish-eyed than ever, probably sore because he hadn't been in on the grim finale. He looked at Bill and he looked at me, and then he turned his head. He cleared his brazen throat so that the porcelain garniture on the mantel shivered, vibrating like the walls of Jericho before they finally crashed.

"Here he is, miss," he said. "I said we'd find him for you."

He moved aside, and there was Susan. Where he'd found her, where they'd been looking for Bill when he must have known very well where he was, I couldn't imagine. And then Sergeant Buck looked as if that stomach-ache had come back. It had been preceded by something very different, as Bill had stood there inside the door and Susan outside it, in some speechless but infinitely intelligible communication that Sergeant Buck apparently took for recalcitrance. I think in another ten seconds he would have picked Bill up by the scruff of his neck and shaken him into his senses. I know from experience that when Sergeant Buck undertakes a Operation Reconciliation, he is not easily turned aside. But I didn't have to use violence. The two Kents had said all they needed to say without any words across the intervening space. It was when they met half-way in each other's arms that Sergeant Buck's face had that look. Murder is one thing but true love is another, and nobody will ever tell me that Sergeant Buck doesn't spend half of every morning listening to the soapiest soap opera there is.

"Now you two go home and pack," he said. "These are the tickets."

He reached in his inside coat pocket and brought out a couple of tickets at least a yard long.

"The little lady says you're going back to Ottawan."

The little lady, I thought, was learning fast.

I sat alone in the big drawing room. The Sergeant had gone on with them and gone upstairs as they'd gone down. It was quite awhile before he came back. He closed the door and came over where I was sitting. He'd congealed back to basic form.

"It's the way the Colonel said, ma'am. He figgered something was off color as soon as he heard there was a blonde in the picture. I figgered it might not be what it looked like. When Mrs. Hall called up in the middle of the night, scared about you, and was bein' cagey about her own alibi, he said we was to keep an eye on Mr. Hallett."

"I suppose he told you Mr. Stubblefield was going to get killed too, didn't he?" I asked, amiably. It seemed to me that Colonel Primrose was being granted almost General Staff infallibility, at the point.

"No, ma'am." Sergeant Buck changed to the tarnished brass hue. He would no doubt have spat if the surroundings had been less inspiring. "No, ma'am. He didn't say that. He ain't a wizard, ma'am."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said. "I'd be gladder to hear what happened to you and Susan Kent."

"She was at Headquarters when Mr. Hallet called up, ma'am. I figgered it was no place for a girl like her. It struck me it wouldn't do him no harm to cool off, and begin to wonder whether she was comin' back or not. He's young, ma'am. You got to learn how to get along with wömen. You got to understand 'em. It takes a long time with some people. Some of 'em never learn. And some wömen the Lord himself couldn't get along with."

It was the longest speech I ever heard Sergeant Buck make. I was sure he was going to spit then, but he restrained himself. All he did was say, "No offense meant, ma'am." He did say that.

"And none taken, Sergeant," I replied.

He turned to go. At the door he stopped. "The Colonel's better, ma'am," he said. "He can have visitors tomorrow, if anybody wanted to visit him, to cheer him up."

"Good," I said. "I'm sure there must be somebody around we can get. I'll see what I can do."

He looked as if he wasn't sure he understood wömen himself, at that point, but he went on out, closing the door patiently behind him.

Dorothy left her house the next day and came home with me. We were sitting out in the garden in the morning, a couple of days later, talking, when the phone rang inside. We'd been talking about her and what she was going to do.

"Will you ever marry Ellery Seymour, Dorothy?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, definitely no. I couldn't. This wouldn't have happened without him. I don't hate him, I just have no feeling about him. We'll go somewhere, you and I, Grace. We'll think of a place to go. There's Lilac—you're wanted on the phone."

I was definitely wanted on the phone. It was as a result of that phone call that I went down to the Stubblefields' hotel a little after lunch time. Mrs. Stubblefield wanted to see me.

I suppose I expected to see her as crushed as Dorothy was, but not at all. Mrs. Stubblefield had the kind of inner determined core that it takes more than we'd been through to crush. She was there in the sitting room, dressed in widow's weeds, with a great pile of papers on the desk in front of her. Milton Minor was there too.

"I understand the Kents have gone back to Ottawan," he'd said

as he met me in the foyer. "We're going to offer him a job—a big job."

The "we" surprised me a little. It had a horribly editorial touch to it. But inside, I began to understand.

"Milton's been such a help to me, my dear," Mrs. Stubblefield said. "He's preparing a new book about my dear husband. It's going to be a memorial that Enoch would be proud to have."

She looked at Milton, sadly, but not too sadly, and then she looked back at me.

"Your aura's came clear again, my dear. It's a lovely blue. It's lost the yellow tinge it had. Auras are so important. That big man was here today. The military man. Buck, Milton, is that his name?"

Milton Minor nodded.

"His aura is red, it's quite red." She looked at Milton again. "And Milton's aura is beautiful, Mrs. Latham. It's gold. It's shining gold."

"I'll bet," I said. There was no doubt about that. Milton, as Dorothy had stated, might be a louse, but any louse with the Stubblefield millions would be a louse with a golden aura. I looked at him. He did have the grace to blush. It was probably the last time he would ever have to.

And Mrs. Stubblefield ought some day to set up as a seeress in her own right. Having foretold Milton's future so accurately, she'd also hit the target smack in the bull's-eye a second time that day. I didn't know it till that evening when I called Sergeant Buck to tell him I'd go see the Colonel at ten o'clock the next morning. It was then I learned that Sergeant Buck's aura really was red. It was not only red, it was spotted, and it had broken out all over him from one end to the other. Sergeant Buck had the measles too.

I didn't mean to laugh, but I did, so I pulled myself quickly together.

"No offense meant, Sergeant," I said.

He hesitated only a moment.

"And none taken, ma'am," he said.

I hung up the phone. It was pleasant to know that a beautiful friendship remained intact . . . as intact, that is, as it had ever been.

MURDER IN THE TOWN

BY

MARY RICHART

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IT HAD TURNED hot for June and Mr. Dixon thrived on hot weather. He was on his way up from Rochelle to Plumhill. At Hawthorne he stopped his car and lowered the top. This not only let the sun beat over his shoulders, it let him sit comfortably straight without bumping his head on the car-top ceiling.

He wished sadly that he could turn his battered car around and drive to the deep South for his vacation. But the Southern newspapers had given too much ridiculous publicity to that New Orleans tragedy—to the dismay of Oakwood's faculty.

Mr. Dixon's mind traveled back to that weird Eversham family, with their strange ways of loving and hating.

Old man Eversham was the third richest man in New Orleans. And that fact seemed to color everything, thought Mr. Dixon angrily—he always got angry when he thought of his involuntary entanglement in the New Orleans murder. Or, more accurately, he always got angry when he thought of what had happened afterwards. In solemn session of the full Oakwood faculty, the Dean had asked him please to remember that he was head of the English Department. And the chairman of the special committee got the floor to remind him that college faculty members were supposed to be teachers, not policemen. Mr. Dixon thought of all this as he rode along the river towards Plumhill.

Right now he suffered great ennui. He was bored and exhausted from the winter's teaching. Plumhill, he reflected, was a nice, quiet town. Here painters and musicians came and summer stock companies. And each year, when the grapes hung black and sweet, the town sent its new crop of students the short distance down to Rochelle's Oakwood College.

Suddenly a meadow lark sang and immediately Mr. Dixon began to have a marvelous holiday feeling. To him birds always meant peace and quiet, and there would be robins and wrens in Freda

Nash's garden. Freda's house would be the ideal place to rest and to finish his new edition of *The Writing of Fiction*.

Her house was not too big. The ceilings were high, a prime requisite to his comfort, the house itself was neat, the air, he knew, would be sweet with the scent of early summer flowers. Tall lilacs screened Freda's front porch. And there would be an immense red rambler somewhere about.

He felt certain of the neighborhood, too. On the side street, behind Freda's house was a small branch library, where children came and went quietly. Children, somehow, always gave him a holiday feeling. Then there were the handsome old Pilsbury and Morrison houses across the street, and around the corner from the two houses, on little-traveled Kipps Street, was the art museum, referred to locally as the 'Gallery.' A few blocks west was St. Stephen's church—a really fine piece of architecture—and quite near enough for him to hear the bells on Sunday. On his last visit he had stayed at a downtown hotel, which had been pleasant enough. But now, with the necessity of finishing his book before summer's end, Freda's house would be the perfect setup.

At the very moment that he rode into town along terraced streets, where the houses were gay with orange and blue awnings and bouquets of spring flowers, some of Mr. Dixon's neighbors were speaking of him. . . .

The old Pilsbury mansion, and the Morrison house next door, sat in the middle of their block-long gardens like two doves of peace. Both houses were old, remodeled, brought up-to-date, with their carriage drives now neat driveways of cement to modernized garages. The gray Pilsbury house was just a little shabby, for since the great depression, Miss Pilsbury had been on her uppers. This was why she had been obliged, in time, to bolster her small income by accommodating a few select and congenial "paying guests."

To Aggie, Miss Pilsbury's very efficient cook, this June day seemed very much like any other June day; already the butter was soft, flies had slipped in through the hole in one of the dining room screens, the cream, left on the table for tardy Miss Haddie's breakfast, had curdled.

On Monday, Aggie always made pies. Today, as she flattened the spongy dough with her long fingers, she listened idly to Joey, the

colored houseboy, expatiate on the super-detective abilities of Elva Moore's friend, Mr. Dixon.

According to Joey, Mr. Dixon could beat J. Edgar Hoover with one hand tied behind him.

"Well, all I say is, it's nice of Miss Freda to let him have her house while she's gone to Boston to visit her mother," Aggie said, spreading the top crust neatly on the second pie. "I guess she likes Mr. Dixon pretty well. Like I say, she's going to need a stepfather for that little boy Dunky one of these bright days."

Obviously, this was beyond Joey's depths.

"All I know is nobody better do no crimes while Mist' Dixon's here," he said. "I sho is glad he's comin'. Miss Elva promised she'll ast him to learn me how to be a de-tective. Hot diggity dog!"

"I guess Mr. Dixon's got friends in town besides Miss Elva and Mr. Larry," Aggie said, wiping the dry flour from her fingers. "Miss Haddie says he's an old friend of hers, too. She went to his college classes like the others."

Joey made a wry face.

"I don't like that woman, Miss Haddie. I sho don't."

"Quit playing on her harpsichord when she goes downtown and you won't get in no trouble with her," Aggie warned. "It's like the Bible say, you got to avoid how things look. Anyway, she's not so bad, Miss Haddie ain't."

"I don't like that woman. I sho don't."

"You said it twice already. It's like I say, she's not bad. Funny thing. I sees her crying one day. She was standing in the dining room, looking out the winder, with nothing out there in the garden to see but the little Morrison girl next door, playing Indian by the fountain. 'Homesick?' I says, seeing I had to say something, being caught with the cat out of the bag, so's to speak. You could 'a knocked me over with a feather the nice way she talked to me. I learned something, too."

"I betcha you didn't learn nothin' good," Joey said sulkily.

"Her diamond ring means she's engaged to a captain in England. And her getting along, too, mind you, nearer forty than thirty, is my guess. 'Aggie,' she says, 'this town was my home, I was born here, and I came back to see it once more before I goes away to England forever. I'm going soon,' she says, 'forever, Aggie.' Like that. 'And I hope,' she says, like vinegar, 'they'll be satisfied.'

Like I says to my husband Frank, she sounded sad and sorrowful."

"She can't git away too soon for me," Joey muttered.

"She'll take her grandmother's harpsichord with her, too. And then you can't play it when she goes downtown. Like I say to Frank, she's not so bad."

"I'se a Christian boy an' I ain't goin' to argue," Joey grumbled. "Reckon I better go out an' water the grass 'fore it dies."

"No you don't water the grass," Aggie said sharply. "Miss Pilsbury ain't feeling too good, and you got to dust down the stairs before she gets back from the drugstore. What do you think she pays you five dollars a week for? You spend more time at the Gallery dusting Mr. Sylvester's pictures and things, and on Mrs. Morrison's lawn, than you do here. And Miss Pilsbury treating you so good. Get along now and dust the stairs."

Joey got his dustcloth. He went out front, but he was back in a moment.

"Looky," he said. "That Miss Haddie has done gone over across the street to Miss Freda's porch. What's she sittin' there for I wants to know? With the house shet up three days, waitin' for Mist' Dixon?"

"Go along," said Aggie impatiently.

"I sees a car, too, with a tall head up in the trees on the park-way," Joey said excitedly. "I betcha it's Mist' Dixon comin' ahead o' time! The car's standin' still. But I betcha it's Mist' Dixon!"

It was Mr. Dixon, all right. He had drawn up by the library curb and was looking at the scene.

As he turned in on Freda's drive a moment later, a long-forgotten sound, the gentle twanging of a swing, came to him. Then another sound reached him.

"Hello, Professor, here's the bad penny again!"

A woman's voice, thin, and a little high, touching chords of memory . . .

"Gwendoline Haddie, Professor," said the voice. "Remember me? Here I am—on the porch behind the lilacs."

He got out of his car, came up the three steps, greatly astonished.

"What we least expect generally happens," he said almost formally, in his deep baritone. "You were in Paris the last time I saw you. Shortly before Munich, wasn't it?"

"Seems so long ago, doesn't it, Totem?" She hadn't forgotten the affectionate nickname his height had earned him on Oakwood campus.

She stood up, tossed her cigarette through an opening in the lilacs, and shook hands with him. The touch of her hand was like the feel of satin. She was tall, thin, and birdlike, and there was, he thought, a new element about her, a hardness . . .

Which might be, he felt, for he had an observing mind, her too-red lips . . . or the obviously plucked eyebrows. Oddly, he noticed her hair, still yellow, but a little faded, worn with a curled bang, the rest piled high on her head. Maybe it was the bang that gave her the hard look . . . She wore a thin blue dress with pale sprays of yellow daisies. Then he noticed that she was wearing the amber beads she had got hold of in Paris that time.

For a moment his thoughts ran back a dozen years or more . . .

"I just got back from town when Elva came in—I'm over at Miss Pillsbury's, you know," said Gwendoline. "Elva thought she saw your car on Kipps Street. Nobody could mistake it, she said. Aren't you ever going to get a new one, Totem? Ancient before the war, wasn't it? Anyway, I ran over to surprise you. Couple of days early, aren't you? Elva's gone up to her room to find your door key. Freda left it with her. Aren't you glad to see me, Totem?"

"Oh, yes, of course," Mr. Dixon said, not certain whether he was pleased or displeased, but conscious of a feeling that something had changed. "How are you, Gwendoline? You still have your amber, I see . . ."

The door opened in the Pillsbury house across the street and Elva Moore, swinging a key-chain, ran blithely down the steps to the barberry walk. Elva was just about as pleased to have Mr. Dixon come to Freda's house for his vacation as Joey was. In her freshman year she had been very much in love with him. That was before Larry's charms had finally overcome all obstacles.

Swinging the key now as if it were a little banner of welcome, she dashed across the street to Freda's house. Above the tall lilacs that screened Freda's porch she could see Mr. Dixon's bushy dark hair.

"Hello, Professor, and welcome to our fair city!" she said, beaming. "How's the book?"

"So-so," he said. "Glad to see you, Elva. I'll hope to finish the book here, must finish it, in fact. Haven't done much on it since I saw you, however."

He turned to Gwendoline again.

"We were just speaking of her amber beads, Elva," he said.

"It's the Miletus string," Gwendoline said. "Remember, Professor?"

Mr. Dixon's innocent round eyes studied the beads.

"I remember very well . . . Thales of Miletus was the first to observe that when amber is rubbed it becomes capable of attracting light bodies. Probably the first electrical phenomenon produced by man . . . Valuable string, probably."

Gwendoline laughed shortly. "No. Had a value put on in London. Might get five hundred, they told me. I don't care a damn if I lose them, but I think they're safe on my neck."

She flipped open an enormous and shiny bag, fished for her lipstick, drew hard red lines across her mouth, got up. A warm finger of sunlight touched her beads, turned them to gold . . .

"Must toddle along," she said. "By the way, I'm returning to England shortly, Professor. Each day I get a little done—picking up my old family stuff, you know. I'm glad you got here before I left. Very glad."

Elva said she would open the door and go in and raise the windows, as the rooms were probably warm and stuffy, and Mr. Dixon nodded and walked to the curb with Gwendoline.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Gwendoline said with a bright smile that somehow seemed slightly sardonic. "I'll tell you all about my English captain, Totem."

2

AS HE WATCHED Gwendoline Haddie cross the street in the warm mellow sunlight, her shoulders held at a self-conscious and almost defiant angle, Mr. Dixon felt a somber sense of unreality about meeting her here on Freda's porch. All right, he told himself as he stood

there, he might have been in love with her once . . . five years, ten years . . . before he knew Freda. But that was done and over with, it was as dead as the tomb, and she was not going to disturb him, emotionally or otherwise. Neither his vacation nor his writing would suffer, he would see to that. What devilish fate had brought her anyway? . . .

There had been, he remembered, vague rumors in Paris of a scandal . . . an affair with a married man. It had hit him hard at the time, so hard that he had left Paris at once. He had not wanted to know what the thing was. The only real defense men had when it came to women was to get away from them, to get away as far as possible. Freda, he reflected, did not have Gwendoline Haddie's golden beauty, but she had a freshness and a finespun attribute of good will that was above price. . . .

Mr. Dixon turned as Elva Moore called from the doorway. He carried his bags in, listened patiently while Elva explained about the groceries. Freda had left all the staples he would need. They would telephone for milk deliveries to start at once. Joey was to look after the kitchen work.

All right. Fine. He was very grateful. He hoped Larry was well? Larry was very well, Elva said. She turned and grinned at him, a shimmer of amusement in her warm gray eyes.

"Miss Haddie's been here about a month, and Freda and I decided not to tell you," she said. "I rented her the room while Miss Pilsbury was away. I didn't realize that people around here don't like her. Well, she's going away soon, Professor, and Freda says I'm to see to it that she's not to bother you."

"She's not to bother me?" he said, and raised his eyes to the ceiling as if he had not the slightest idea what Elva was talking about.

Elva went up to him, raised herself high on her tiptoes, and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "That's from Freda. She told me to kiss you welcome for her. Larry said he didn't mind. By the way, Totem, now that I'm married to a nice husband, have my college degree, and published a story or two, do tell me how tall you are?"

"Never mind," Mr. Dixon said. "That's strictly my own business."

"I think I know anyway," Elva said laughing. "But I won't tell. Mr. Sylvester, over at the Gallery, brought your kitten this morning—he brought it a few days early because the neighborhood

children teased so for it. I promised to help take care of it. Shall we go over now and get it?"

As they went down the sidewalk a tall, robust woman came toward them. She wore a tiny sailor hat perched on her hair like the lid of a cookie jar. She moved along in her walk with a swaying motion . . . Like a fine race horse, he thought, put out to pasture. It was Miss Patricia Pilsbury, and when she saw them, she stopped as if astonished.

"Why, it's you, Mr. Dixon!" She moved the cookie jar lid back on her black hair and held out a strong hand. "You're early, aren't you? We didn't expect you before Wednesday. Did we, Elva? Have you solved any new murder cases recently?"

"Heavens, no," he said. "Through with that sort of thing forever. Never was my line, Miss Pilsbury. I'm here to finish a book."

"Has Elva told you that you're to have dinner with us whenever you wish?" she said. "Just phone Aggie. Come tonight, if you like. I may not be at table, not feeling tops. Just been to the drug-store. Nice to see you again."

Miss Pilsbury went on toward her front door and they walked along in the direction of Kipps Street. The cupola of the Gallery was visible from the corner. The young maples that lined the sidewalk were full of twittering birds.

"Did you meet the curator, Mr. Sylvester, when you were here before?" Elva asked.

"No. Sorry. Somehow, I didn't get around to the Gallery."

"Nice guy," she said. "Married recently for the first time." She added, with a giggle, "About twenty years between them."

"And people gossip, I suppose?"

"Of course." Elva's voice dropped. "Here comes Mrs. Douglas. She's living at Miss Pilsbury's, too. She's feuding over something!"

Mr. Dixon drew his handkerchief out of his pocket, mopped his face. All these women coming upon him so unexpectedly was disagreeable and confusing . . . They did not belong in the picture.

Mrs. Douglas acknowledged Elva's introduction to Mr. Dixon with a short nod, turned her attention to Elva. "My dear, in the wretched state of my health, I ought not to talk about it, but I must! I must ask you if you've heard what Sylvester did?"

"I heard your statuette was lost," said Elva lightly.

Mrs. Douglas turned to Mr. Dixon. "With the wretched state of

my health I had to give up housekeeping and dispose of my things. I presented the Gallery with my statuette, Athena. Mr. Sylvester said it would have to be stored in the basement temporarily. Last October, mind you! I slipped into the basement yesterday and searched for it. It's not there! He has destroyed it!"

"Athena?" murmured Mr. Dixon, moving his head out of some maple branches. "Regrettable, very . . ."

There was more to Mrs. Douglas's story and her voice went on and on but Elva managed to find a place to break away.

As they went off down the street, Mr. Dixon mused, "'Athena came from Heaven and stood behind him and caught him by the yellow hair . . .' Achilles, I think the yellow hair was."

Elva giggled again.

"Believe it or not, Professor," she said, "But Mr. Sylvester's hair is as yellow as corn! Maybe he's Achilles?"

They went up the alley to the far side, where the opening in the hedge was, just back of the Morrison garden, and on to the curator's office. Mr. Sylvester greeted them cordially. He was a blue-eyed, dapper man, with neatly pointed golden burnsidés and neatly-pointed golden hair.

A tiger-striped kitten was asleep in a basket under his desk.

"Youth and beauty, even in animals," he said, lifting the kitten. "My wife says it's the best of the lot. Brought it along today because Rita's going away for a few days."

Mr. Dixon said it was a nice kitten. He liked kittens. "I've come to finish a piece of writing and somehow I write best with a cat around," he said. "Cats are kindly and never nervous."

On the way back with the kitten Mr. Dixon was troubled with a growing conviction that there was something here not in harmony with the peace he had felt when his car jogged along the flower-terraced streets. He was on the point of mentioning it to Elva, then decided it was too farfetched. But his sense of relaxation—that holiday feeling of vacation—was leaving him.

Elva went as far as his steps. She gave him an account of the town's centennial fiesta that was to be held that evening at the downtown park. The Mayor and Colonel Hill—just home from China—were to make speeches, she said, and there was to be a band, Chinese lanterns, and loads of pink lemonade and ice cream. And dancing.

"Larry has to work, so I'm going to have dinner with Betty. Then we'll run in on the fiesta," Elva said. "Want to go along, Totem?"

"Lord, no," he said. "Got to get on with my work."

Elva smiled cheerfully. "You mustn't think every day is going to be like this afternoon," she said. "Over my dead body if anybody gets to you after today!"

Mr. Dixon said goodbye, took the kitten in, looked for milk. He found and opened a can, began to feel at home. There was a high thick hedge of English privet between Freda's garden and the library, one at the rear edge of the lot, and another along the side street. Birds twittered in the hedge.

He shut the kitten in the kitchen, went for a walk to stretch his legs after the drive up. The Morrison house, now . . . The two Morrisons and their child, Roberta. He looked for Roberta, but the Morrison part of the garden between the two houses seemed bare and deserted. The shrubs in the back part of the Morrison garden were blooming profusely but the flower beds in the front part were without color or blooms. There had been squirrels in the big elm, he remembered, and a block or two over, toward the church, was a store that carried peanuts in a barrel.

On his way to the store for peanuts he realized he had not entirely shaken off that feeling of premonition . . . Damn it, was it premonition? Might it not be meeting with Gwendoline again? It was like meeting a pale ghost . . . All right, all right—at thirty-two or three—a girl—beautiful, golden-haired—thin, wraithlike—gazing at you constantly while you lectured—so pretty, so obviously overdressed—that was Gwendoline on the campus . . . "Oh, Professor, could you sit on the Rose Walk bench with me for a moment and help me with that assignment? . . ."

To Mr. Dixon, "premonitions" were scientific potentialities, one of Dr. Rhine's extra-sensory perceptions. Like Socrates' Genius, his hunches, as he called them, tugged his sleeve only when something was wrong . . .

When he came to the Morrison corner with his peanuts, Joey was down on his knees, clipping the grass along the edges of the cement walk.

"I sho am glad to see you, Mist' Dixon," Joey said, beaming happily. "Soon's I get through this an' dust Miss Pilsbury's stairs—she

been after me las' two hours to dust 'em—then I'll be over an' hang yo clo's in the closet."

Mr. Dixon made suitable sounds of appreciation.

"By the way," he said, "where is the little Morrison girl, Roberta?" He had in his pocket a silver animal for the child's animal collection. "Is she around?"

"She's up Boston way, Mist' Dixon. Her mamma took her up soon as school was out to visit her grandma. Didn't tell nobody. Her mamma come right back but Roberta ain't come back. Her papa, Mist' Robert, say he gonna up an' fetch her back any day if she don't hurry. That man sho' is crazy about that chile!"

"Naturally . . ." Mr. Dixon tossed a peanut toward a squirrel. "She's an enchanting child!"

"Yassir, Mist' Robert is crazy about her, lack I say. The way he do git that chile fine toys! He fill the house with 'em. An' her mamma say tain't right, it's goin' ruin that chile. Her mamma cries about it, too."

"Oh, well, women cry, Joey. 'Ah, would I were dead now, or up in my bed now, to cover my head now, and have a good cry.' That's women, Joey!"

"Yassir, I sho likes po'try, Mist' Dixon."

Mr. Dixon lifted his round eyes toward the sky. When he was here before he had helped little Roberta fly a kite. Roberta had laughed and clapped her hands. The kite, roundish and yellow, had hung against the clouds like a golden moon . . .

"I don't know when Roberta's comin' back, Mist' Dixon. I ast her mamma almost every day. But she won't say."

Mr. Dixon drew his gaze back from the sky as an image of Roberta's mother emerged slowly in his mind, a dark-haired, dark-eyed, prim-looking woman. As nearly always happened with Mr. Dixon, once the memory door was pushed open, everything behind it came tumbling out, pellmell. Something, he remembered, lay deep in Mrs. Morrison's dark eyes, something baneful, like pressure or suffering or fear or hate. . . .

He said with sudden curiosity, "How do you know she took Roberta to Boston without telling anybody, Joey?"

"She left a note on the pincushion. I don't do her inside work reg'lar, but she ast me to dust up the day she left for Boston. An' there it was. It say to please forgive her for not tellin' him she

was taking Roberta to Boston to her grandma's. Yassir, I seed the note."

"You get around, Joey," Mr. Dixon said mildly. "Better go dust those stairs now, hadn't you? I'll see you later."

As he started on his way he looked up a little higher and saw not the sky but a young man standing at Miss Pilsbury's third-floor window. The young man was gazing down at him with a broad and friendly smile.

When Miss Pilsbury took her last two thousand dollars from her savings account and remodeled her house, shortly before the disaster of Pearl Harbor, she had the front part of her top floor made into a three-room suite, and as one room had a skylight, it made an excellent studio for young Verne Williams, painter, at work at his easel for the first time since returning from the Pacific.

Watching the slim giant pass on down the street, Williams guessed easily that it was Elva Moore's friend, Mr. Dixon, from Oakwood. "I wish I could put him on canvas," he murmured. "He's like a pine tree!"

Maybe he could paint Mr. Dixon later, he thought. But he must paint Miss Haddie first . . . Miss Haddie, with her still lovely golden hair tucked high on her head, sitting at the harpsichord. "Lady at the Harpsichord," in golds, purple, soft tones . . . It would be a humdinger. It would boost him right up to the top!

A door opened in the hall below and he heard Joey's voice, followed by Miss Haddie's angry tones. "My God, another quarrel," Williams thought, opening his door softly.

"You've been playing the harpsichord again while I was out!" Miss Haddie was half-shouting. Williams could hear her small high heels go click-click. "Don't deny it!"

"I dusted upstairs rooms like I always do." Joey's voice sounded sullen. "Got to dust, hasn't I, Miss Haddie? Got to dust the harpsichord keys. Miss Pilsbury say for me to do a good job. Got to bresh up the stairs an' go hang up Mist' Dixon's clo's now."

"You played it again after I told you not to," she said. "You shut the door and people hear it and think it's—it's *me*!"

Williams moved uneasily, came into the upper hall. "Damn her temper," he muttered.

"No'm," Joey was saying. "They isn't goin' to think *that*."

"Now you're being insolent," she cried. "I shall ask Miss Pilsbury to discharge you. Anyhow, you're sloppy with your dusting. I'll have you fired before I leave. Watch me!"

"I don't wanta be fired outta this job, Miss Haddie. I sho don't."

Williams slid down the banisters, bowed and smiled.

"A thousand pardons, Miss Haddie, but we can begin your sittings immediately," he said, winking at Joey to make his escape. "Just finished the bridge scene, darling, and it's chipper. You must come up this evening and see it."

"After dinner, pettie," she said, with a grimace in the direction of Joey. "I get so damned mad at that boy!"

"Don't be too hard on the poor devil," Williams said. "He's just a kid and the harpsichord entrances him. You can't imagine how much I'm looking forward to our sittings. Got to hurry like the devil, too, to get them in before you leave."

"Yes, we mustn't wait any longer," she said. "I'll come up after dinner. For certain. After I write my captain."

Williams blew her a kiss, went on down, crossed the street. Through the branches of the lilacs he could see Mr. Dixon, rocking gently on Freda's porch.

He could also see somebody walking briskly down the street, somebody he wanted to avoid. It was Dr. Young, who had one of Miss Pilsbury's second-floor rooms. He had no love for Dr. Young. He knew he could well imagine it, but Young's eyes seemed always to be saying, "What, painting? Idling your time away at an easel with the world still in such a mess? . . ." Silly, of course . . . Damned inferiority complex, probably.

He raised his hand in a salute to Young, turned in at Freda's house, went up and introduced himself to Mr. Dixon, who stayed in his rocker because the kitten was curled on his knee.

"A thousand pardons," he said with his genial smile, "but I'm dodging Dr. Young . . . damn the fellow!"

"H'm," Mr. Dixon said with a half-sigh. "Dr. Young? Lives over at Miss Pilsbury's, too?"

"I'm a hell of a fellow, I suppose," Williams said, making himself at home in the swing. "I'm a grouch, don't mistake me. But that fellow works too hard! It sort of bullies me. I'm a capitalist and in theory capitalists are supposed to believe in hard work. Pure bilge. It's foul for anybody to work as hard as Young. Devilish depressing.

I'm a painter and paint only when the spirit moves me. Otherwise you can't get the essence, the soul."

"I saw your 'Chinese Lady' at the Chatfield-Walker exhibit. Liked it. Very much."

"Really? Splendid. By the way, have you seen Miss Haddie yet? And her harpsichord? I understand you are old friends. She cried out to be painted à la Saint Cecilia. She's coming to my rooms to-night. I want to start sittings at once. 'Lady at the Harpsichord'—With a thousand memories shining in her face. I want to get those memories!"

A thousand memories. . . . Mr. Dixon reached for his pipe, began packing at the tobacco. His premonitions were working overtime.

"This town is a corker, Professor," Williams said. "Everybody interested in everybody. People in New York are lackadaisical. You're positively not interested in them."

"Or they in you," Mr. Dixon said, puffing at his pipe while he scratched the kitten's ear.

"Except your intimates," Williams said, "Think of your neighbors there—no, you can't! You haven't any neighbors. We're only a few miles up the river from Manhattan, but here people get into your hair, they addle your wits, if you don't take it easy. God, it marvelous!"

THE JUNE DAY had been the kind that poets sing of, and had ended with a painter's sunset.

The sunset, as it happened, was yellow. Broad streaks ran horizontally, like the slats of a Venetian blind, around the sky from the horizon to the zenith.

Many people believe that a bright yellow sky at sunset in summer points to rain and whether true or false, the rain came. It came suddenly about ten o'clock and was soon over. But it sent people at the fiesta scurrying into Miller's drugstore and to Wisner's. Many

with cars, hurried home, called it a day. Mr. Dixon, who had been reading, heard the downpour, unfolded his long legs and went to the door to inspect things in general and the sky in particular.

Lights burned in Williams' studio, in Gwendoline Haddie's west window, and across the front of the Morrison house. There was something a little strange about Gwendoline's window, he thought, for although he did not have a straight view of the window from where he stood, he could tell that it was up, with the rain beating in and the curtains flying. Mr. Dixon possessed a mild curiosity about most things under the heavens and in the seas below, and he asked himself now where Gwendoline was. If she was upstairs visiting with Williams, why did she not come downstairs to shut her window? And then he hit upon it—she had gone to the park for the fiesta, of course.

It would be like Gwendoline to be careless about closing her windows, he reflected. He went back to his chair and reading then. He got out his pipe. And felt very comfortable. It had been so quiet all evening, the air had cooled, and the purring kitten was peace itself.

Suddenly he dropped his book. A sound that was a cross between the squeak of rusty hinges and the bleat of a sheep aroused him. The bleat was forming his name: "Mist' Dixon! Mist' Dixon!"

He made the front door in two or three long steps, switched on the porch light. Joey was stumbling up the steps, his thin blue shirt damp and spotted with water about the shoulders. His eyes were bulging. Joey's right arm stuck out like the arm of a windmill, and wrapped loosely around his hand was Gwendoline Haddie's string of amber, glistening dark and golden in the glow from the ceiling light.

"Mist' Dixon, Mist' Dixon," Joey gasped, "somethin' turrible's over there in the garden! It—got after me! I was comin' through on my way over here from the Gallery—I seed your lights burnin' and I wanted to ast you somethin'—and I—I—"

"Wait," broke in Mr. Dixon. "What are you doing with Miss Haddie's beads?"

"When I come across I sees the beads in my flashlight on the drive by Mist' Morrison's garage. I picks 'em up an' then I hears somethin' moving in the shrubs, down low, crawlin' like. An' I runs over here as fast as I kin run!"

Mr. Dixon slammed the door behind him. "Call Dr. Young—or Mr. Williams—or anybody," he said, and began to run.

As he crossed the street, as fast as his long legs could take him, he heard Joey at the Pilsbury house, shouting, "Mist' Williams! Dr. Young! Miss Pilsbury! Come quick!"

Mr. Dixon ran along by the Pilsbury house to the alley. A thin hedge of bridal wreath lay along the high fence, shutting off the alley. He tried the garage door. It was unlocked, and putting his hand in, he found and turned the switch, flooding half of the garden with a strong light. There was no sign of anything but the rain-drenched shrubs and flowers. And the wet cement of the driveway.

At this moment, Williams and Joey came running.

"This way, Joey says," Williams cried, opening the gate and darting down the alley.

They ran through the second gate, into the Morrison garden. Williams had taken Joey's flashlight. Its thin beam, making little watch-faces along the roots of the dripping shrubs, suddenly touched a sodden heap.

It lay under a shallow row of chaste bridal wreath.

"My God," Williams cried. "It's Miss Haddie—Gwendoline!"

"Wait, let me see, please," said a quiet voice from the shadows.

It was Dr. Young. He came over with the imperturbable and quiet efficiency of the medical man and stooped down to the body.

"Yes . . . dead," he said. "Body still warm. Let me have your flashlight, Williams . . . A blow on the head. She's been murdered. We must call the police. Nobody must touch anything until they come. Who found her?"

Mr. Dixon, feeling a little nausea, looked around to indicate Joey. But Joey had vanished.

"I will stay with the poor thing," said Williams, lighting a cigarette with shaking fingers. "You two call the police."

"I'll be across the street if you need me," Mr. Dixon said. "I'll let you call the police, if you don't mind, Dr. Young."

He retraced his steps into the alley and back down the Pilsbury drive and across the street to Freda's house. When he opened the door and stepped into the hall he heard a soft, "St-t-t!" and going into the kitchen, discovered a black face peeping out at him from the pantry closet.

"Is you by yo'self, Mist' Dixon?" the face whispered.

"Come out of there," Mr. Dixon said heavily. "Why are you hiding, Joey?"

Joey came out, his body trembling like thin jelly, and followed the professor into the living room.

"Mist' Dixon, I hadn't ought to 'a' teched them beads. I sees 'em there on the drive, inside the gate, an' I thinks, here's Miss Haddie's beads she's lost an' I picks 'em up. Is they goin' to think I hit her?"

"They probably will think so," Mr. Dixon said, looking down coldly from his great height at the boy.

"Mist' Dixon, does you mean you think I hit her?"

"I don't know yet what I think. I'll have to know more about everything before I can make up my mind as to who hit her."

"Mist' Dixon, I ain't teched that piece of iron since I put it in the corner of the garage. I swear I ain't."

"What piece of iron?"

"Didn't you see it a-layin' there by the gate? The shaker to Miss Pilsbury's furnace. The little knob at the top got broke off las' winter an' Miss Pilsbury say she'd buy a new one. So I puts it out to sell to the junk man some day and he ain't come along yet. An' it's layin' right there for the police to see. Ought I to go get it, Mist' Dixon, an' hide it 'efore they gits here?"

"Not if you value your skin! How old are you, Joey?"

"Seventeen, goin' on eighteen. I sho feel turrible, Mist' Dixon!"

"I see you've put the beads on the table. Have you any idea of the value of the beads, Joey?"

"I heard Miss Haddie say they was worth five hundred dollars. That's a heap o' money fer beads, an' them not even gold."

Mr. Dixon walked to the front door, came back.

"All right," he said harshly. "Did you kill Miss Haddie?"

"No, sir, Mist' Dixon," said Joey. "I's a Christian boy, I goes to church every Sunday. An' I'm sho scairt of dead people."

"All right," said Mr. Dixon, more gently. "You're in a mess, I'm afraid. But if you are telling the truth, it will come out all right. Now go back across the street and face the music. Don't hide or run away. Just tell the police the truth and nothing but the truth."

"Yassir," said Joey, and started back, mumbling disconsolately to himself about going back to Mississippi and over to Vicksburg.

Looking across the street, Mr. Dixon could see some people standing near the Morrison garage. Two cars rolled up from the

direction of downtown and three or four men jumped out. The police, he reflected, as they ran up the driveway with their flashlights playing over the wet grass and shrubs. Sighing heavily, Mr. Dixon went back to his pipe. For a moment he thought of Gwendoline's captain, waiting in London . . .

Somebody was coming up to his door. Mr. Dixon's pipe sagged. It was Williams and Larry Moore. Larry was the young GI who had married Elva immediately on his return from Germany, and who had taken a job on the police force to keep the home fires burning until he could get back to college for his final year. In spite of his square jaw and his bushy eyebrows, Larry was an attractive young man—the handsomest man in Plumhill, Elva said.

"Hi, Professor." Larry spoke, unhappily, from the doorway. "Gosh, this murder is too close to home! The sergeant would like to check Joey's story with you. He's got to check people in both of these houses across the street, you know."

"I understand, Larry. But I'm staying out of this. I'll give you a statement now, which can be corroborated by Joey, Williams and Dr. Young. I'll be right here, if the sergeant wants to see me."

"Okay, Professor," said Larry uneasily. "The sergeant'll probably be looking for you, Williams. He's going to round up everybody in a few minutes."

"He'll find me fast enough if he wants me," Williams said, and dropped comfortably into a chair. "I refuse to be bullied just because I live in the neighborhood!"

Larry got his notebook and pencil ready. He repeated the story that Joey told the sergeant. "Correct, Professor?"

"Correct, so far as I know. He certainly came over here yelling."

"You've been here all evening, I suppose, Professor?"

Mr. Dixon said he had been there all evening.

"What about the amber beads?" asked Larry.

"They're waiting for you on the table there. Joey claims he found them on the cement drive before he heard any sounds from the bushes."

"I'm afraid that won't wash," said Larry. "What do you think, Professor?"

"Haven't formed an opinion yet," Mr. Dixon said.

Williams, who had risen and been pacing about, came back to his

chair. "Take it from me, Moore," he said. "It's a cinch Joey killed her, damn him!"

"Let's not guess too much about these things, Williams," said Mr. Dixon coldly. "Let's wait for facts."

"Golly, don't you have to do a little guessing at first, Professor?" asked Larry. "That's O'Nara's method. Where would you be if you didn't? Give the ball a shove and it will roll a long way. We found the weapon, you know. That old iron shaker that Joey has used a thousand times on Miss Pilsbury's furnace. Now, how's this: Joey came out from the back door of the Gallery and ran across Miss Haddie, did her in, became frightened, and ran over here to you with his cockeyed story of the beads and of hearing something move in the bushes?"

"There are some flaws in your deductions," Mr. Dixon observed quietly. "In the first place, as I intimated, you cannot guess. You must look upon your mind as a room—Sherlock Holmes, I believe—with only one door. Put through the door only facts, not guesses. When all are assembled, you'll suddenly find the shades springing up at windows, unseen before now, and there'll be plenty of light. In the second place, how did the ash shaker reach the spot? On its own legs? No. It was taken to the spot for the sole purpose of striking her down. Even if you establish a motive for Joey, you'll have to answer this question—how did Joey casually do his Gallery work and know the exact minute to get his weapon out of hiding? The exact minute, I mean, that Miss Haddie would appear in the precise spot where she was clubbed? Consider the element of time carefully, too."

Larry chewed his pencil for a moment.

"Look," he said. "We must ask ourselves first, I suppose, what Miss Haddie was doing in the back end of the Morrison drive?"

"Exactly . . ."

"In a way, Professor, that question is number one, isn't it? What was she doing there? . . ."

"Well, she was there, wasn't she?" cried Williams.

"Yes, but *why*?"

"Well, for God's sake, who cares why? Nobody in his right senses, of course, would kill for a string of beads, but killers aren't in their right senses. Joey had probably seen her go between the two gardens

before, he may have put the iron rod along by the fence, or somewhere under a shrub. Being ready for her, he saw her and struck her down."

Mr. Dixon gazed intently at Williams, but remained quiet.

"Look," Larry said. "What makes you think he might have seen her go between the two gardens before?"

"I don't see why he might not have. I've seen her. Several times."

"You've seen her?" Larry half-rose out of his chair.

Mr. Dixon picked up his pipe, packed down some fresh tobacco.

"Sure I've seen her. Right in that spot. Now that I think of it I never saw her there during the day, or go by the front way. Truth is, I never happened to see her on the way over. I've seen her come back from there."

Larry gazed down at the floor for a moment, obviously taking a little time out for thought.

"I see," he said at last.

He lit a cigarette, inhaled slowly.

"You're right, Professor. The thin spot is the weapon."

"Oh, that's easy enough," Williams said eagerly. "As Joey was about to open the gate, he could have seen her at the window, say, he could have dashed for the weapon—where it lay against the fence or under the shrubs—got back and met her at the fatal spot."

Larry sucked his breath in sharply.

"What do you mean . . . he could have seen her at the window?"

"Now see here, Moore," Williams said plaintively. "I'd rather this wouldn't go further for after all the poor woman is dead, and I liked her very much. It's rather diabolical, really. But that's where I saw her a couple of times last week. Peeping in at the Morrison window. From the outside. Naturally, I didn't consider it any of my damned business."

Larry's long fingers drummed on the arm of his chair for a moment. He made a notation in his notebook before he spoke again.

"I'd forgotten it for the moment, but I remember now that Miss Haddie was a second cousin, or something of the sort, to Mrs. Morrison. I never saw them exchange visits . . . Elva will know more about that. Anyway, I suppose she thought it was all right to peep in at her cousin's window. It puts a new light on the thing, though."

"Don't you fellows in the department take fingerprints and that

sort of thing?" said Williams eagerly. "Wouldn't that ash thing be pretty well smeared with the murderer's prints?"

"They're looking after that now," Larry said. "By the way, where were you all evening, Williams?"

"Up in my studio, reading about Aristotle's fable of the eagle. The damn thing perishes of hunger when its beak grows more bent with age, suffers this fate because once when it was human it broke the laws of hospitality. In short, fellow citizens, our national emblem is a snob!"

"You weren't reading about Aristotle's eagle all evening, were you?"

"Now, don't try to bully me, Moore. I could read Aristotle not only all evening but all week, without stopping once. Besides, I was waiting for Miss Haddie, wondering where in the devil she was."

"What?" said Larry, dumbfounded. "You were waiting for the woman we find dead in the garden and you say nothing about it?"

"My God, Moore, you and I have lived in the same house for seven months. You knew I was going to paint Miss Haddie, you knew I liked her. She reminded me of my Aunt Julia. So don't get that damned police tone with me."

"Okay. I'm not trying to bully you. Have either of you anything else to offer?"

"I'm wondering about something," Mr. Dixon said. "Suppose Joey is right. Suppose he did come across the alley from the Gallery, open the Morrison's alley gate, see the necklace on the hard pavement of the drive, and—"

"Wait a sec—let me interpolate, Professor," cut in Williams brightly. "Why can't we answer each question as it arises? First, let's say, what was Joey doing at the Gallery at that hour?"

"He works there a few hours regularly," Larry explained. "Tonight he helped Mr. Sylvester unpack the Batista exhibit. We checked first thing with Sylvester—he came out during the commotion."

"Well, dash it, did you people look for footprints in the muddy garden?" demanded Williams gloomily.

"Yes, but they didn't mean anything—except one thing. There were faint signs that she had dragged herself through the edge of the grass to where the body was found."

"Meaning," broke in Mr. Dixon, "that she must have been conscious . . . after she was struck!"

Williams bounded up from the chair and paced about again.

"You'll have to pardon me," he said hollowly. "First time I was ever mixed up in a murder, and it gets my goat."

"Are you mixed up in one now, Williams?" said Mr. Dixon.

Williams looked at Mr. Dixon, stretched his face into a shaky smile. "Thanks, Professor. I must be careful of what I say—that's what you mean, isn't it? A thousand thanks for the hint. What were you going to say a moment ago when I rudely interrupted you?"

"About the beads," Mr. Dixon said. "The question is, could the beads have fallen, of their own volition, we'll put it—stretching words, of course—but could the string have fallen from Miss Haddie's neck to the ground when she crawled off the drive? They are on a thin gold wire, which gives them a certain stiffness. Her head was probably down. She was bareheaded, too . . ."

Williams, who had sat down while Mr. Dixon was talking, bounced up again.

"My God, let me demonstrate!"

He got the necklace from the stand by Larry's chair, slipped it around his neck, fell to his hands and knees on the floor.

"As you move make a lurching movement—slowly—head low and heavy," said Mr. Dixon. "Yes, that's it . . ."

The beads slipped to the floor.

4

THAT WASN'T absolutely conclusive," Larry remarked, slapping his notebook shut.

"True, but very suggestive of what might have happened," said Mr. Dixon quietly.

"Yes, I suppose it's a definite possibility," conceded Larry.

"Did you see the body, Larry?" Mr. Dixon said. "Tell me about the wound."

"Watched Dr. Eades make a cursory examination. She was struck

from behind, fairly on top of the head, but on the back, you know. Probably never knew what happened, even if she did crawl a few feet. There was a small effusion of blood, but not much. What escaped flowed into her clothes. If any fell on the driveway the hard rain washed it away. Where the driveway divides to make a walk between the Morrison kitchen and the garage is a huge fountain-shaped weigela. The chances are the murderer hid behind the weigela."

"Saw the bush," Mr. Dixon murmured. "*Diervilla florida* of China."

"Well, this would be in favor of Joey's story, wouldn't you say?" enquired Williams energetically. "This business of the beads falling, I mean."

"Not necessarily, the way I look at it," Larry answered. "If he'd waited for her in the open, naturally she would have seen him . . . which has nothing to do with the beads, of course. Well, it might be in his favor . . . I'm not sure. I'd have to think about it a little. Here's a point! A naïve mind like Joey's would hardly foresee the possibility of a necklace falling off a woman's neck like that. Do you think so, Professor?"

"Oh, he might, easily," Mr. Dixon said gently. "Naïve people often seize a truth without knowing it. How did Homer, naïve by our scientific standards of present day knowledge, and who used the fly as a symbol of courage and endurance, how did he know that the fly's flight and breath are co-ordinated, as Ormerod informs us, that its wings are actually forcing-pumps, giving it enormous muscular power and endurance beyond our casual understanding? Joey could have seized the truth about the possibility of the falling necklace . . . much in the same manner."

"My God, Professor, you are wonderful," Williams cried. "I thought you were trying to defend Joey. I offer you a point in his favor and what do you proceed to do? Smash it neatly into a cocked hat!"

"I'm not defending Joey," Mr. Dixon said blandly. "I try only to defend the truth, Williams."

Larry slipped his notebook into his pocket, came to his feet.

"I'll go over and join O'Nara," he announced. "You'd better come too, Williams. O'Nara'll want to talk with you. You were over there in the house when the thing happened."

"No, I'll not come now," Williams replied pleasantly. "You've got down in black and white everything I have to say. As I told you, I was in my studio reading Aristotle—about the eagle, you know—waiting for Miss Haddie, wondering where in the devil she was. She was coming up specifically, in case O'Nara wants to know, to see my masterpiece, the bridge scene."

"Okay. But O'Nara will be sure to want to know what else you did beside reading about the eagle."

"If you're interested in such twaddle, when I first went up I washed some brushes. After that I wrote to my fiancée, Miss Addison—whom you had the extreme pleasure of meeting when she was here in May. After that I read about the snooty eagle."

"Okay," Larry said again. "By the way, when was it you extended your invitation to Miss Haddie? The exact time, or as near as you can arrive at it, I mean? O'Nara will want to know. He has to check on everything."

"My God, let me see . . . When I've been painting hard I take a walk, to shake the kinks out of my legs. I think I must have sat an hour looking at the bridge canvas. It's the best thing I've done, the perspective dazzles you! And my God, the coloring! It'll hang in the Metropolitan, or I'm a real admiral! I had to get away from it, so I went to the window—and saw you, Professor. Joey was there—when I was fixing to leave, I mean. Came in to finish dusting the halls and stairs. He'd just come in, I think, for he and Miss Haddie were having some words. I—"

"Mr. Williams," broke in Larry, sinking down heavily in his chair, "will you please remember that a woman has been murdered? Remember she's dead? A friend of yours to boot? Remember, and tell us as calmly as you can—for heaven's sake—just what you mean by Joey and Miss Haddie having some words? Do you mean they were quarrelling? Or were they talking of the butterflies and birdies?"

Williams made a wry face.

"Really, Moore, it was of no importance. People are always having words like that, about little things, aren't they? I beg you on bended knee not to take little things too seriously. Not that I'm trying to defend Joey. My God, no!"

"Go on, go on," begged Larry. "What did they say?"

"It was just that Miss Haddie thought Joey had been playing her

harpsichord while she was out. He goes in there to dust, and often when she's not present in the flesh, he plays the harpsichord. I always run down, take up a collection afterwards. I mean—in case O'Nara wants to know—I dig down into my pocket. Miss Haddie couldn't do much with the thing. Belonged to her mother or grandmother or somebody like that. But Joey makes a sound on it like wind rustling through a thousand trees. Perfectly enchanting!"

"So she accused Joey?" Larry said heavily. "Go on, Williams. Did she threaten him? And what did Joey say?"

Williams regarded the pattern in Freda Nash's rug for a moment.

"This seems such twaddle, Moore. Joey was extremely diplomatic about it. Didn't deny he'd been playing, didn't acknowledge it."

"Look, Williams, what, specifically, did Miss Haddie say to Joey? Did she threaten him in any way?"

"Oh, this is terrible," Williams said in deep gloom. "She didn't mean it, of course. She was just put out a bit. But she said she'd have him fired out of the dusting job. It wasn't a bad threat at all, Moore. You needn't make a mole hill into a mountain. You damn police are always missing the trees for the woods, or the woods for the trees, whichever way it was."

Larry came to his feet again.

"Okay. Now listen, Williams. Don't speak until I get out of here. I told O'Nara I'd be over here only a minute or two. Every time you open your mouth I have to sit down again. And try to get it through your noggin that he'll want to talk to you. He's a bit excited—murders don't happen every day around here. So be careful!"

Williams remained silent and Larry went out, slamming the screen door behind him.

Mr. Dixon and Verne Williams gazed at each other in profound silence for a few minutes, each waiting for the other to speak. The room seemed full of dampness, it smelled of rain, of wet green things, wet wood, wet earth. Mr. Dixon shuddered.

"I take it, Williams, you didn't tell all you knew about Miss Haddie's squabble with Joey?"

"She was rather a bit more put out than I wanted to say," said Williams. "She was peeved with Joey. But so far as I could see, it fell off Joey's back like the proverbial water from the duck. They'll probably say it was a motive for Joey's killing her!"

"Probably. If they find nothing better." He looked over at Williams. "By the way, how tall are you?"

Williams almost bounced out of his chair again.

"Tall? You don't think I hit her, do you? I'm six feet. And a dwarf compared to you. How tall are you anyhow?"

"Never mind. Too tall, probably, for this case. I had the merest glance at the wound. But I think it was made by a person around five-ten, an inch or two shorter or taller. You could have done it nicely, Williams."

"Maybe," Williams said darkly. "I'm the average height, all right." He lay back in his chair. "Now I come to think of it, Professor, all the people about are pretty tall. Elva. Larry. Miss Pilsbury. Mrs. Douglas. Mr. Robert Morrison and his wife. And Joey . . . Yeah."

A stream of cars seemed to be coming up to the two houses across the street. Lights glared through the windows.

"Yvonne, my fiancée, had the room next to Miss Haddie when she was here," Williams was saying. "They got to know each other pretty well. She said Miss Haddie was a strange gal. Either very happy, or very unhappy. She said Miss Haddie often stood at her window overlooking the garden—sometimes for a half hour at a time—with her face wreathed in smiles." He stood up. "Guess I'd better move on across the street. I don't want those asses to think they can bully me!"

"I'll go with you," Mr. Dixon said. "Elva is probably home now . . ."

5

ELVA MOORE HAD GONE to dinner at Betty Arnold's, and then to the fiesta. When the storm came, she and Betty were among those who ran to Wisner's, and here they sat nibbling little cakes and ice cream until the storm was about over.

Betty's car was across the street from Wisner's, and as soon as the rain had eased a little, the two girls dashed over and started for

home. Betty dropped Elva at the corner near the Gallery, as the rain had suddenly stopped, and Elva hurried down the short block to Miss Pilsbury's corner. The water still flowed over the sidewalk in little rivulets, drenching her open-toed pumps, but who cared? Not Elva.

Coming around Miss Pilsbury's corner, she noticed people were standing on the sidewalk and two police cars hugged the edge of the curb.

As she ran up toward the Morrison drive, she saw Sergeant O'Nara, and Peterson, of the homicide squad, and as she came even with them, she ran along, tugging at Peterson's coat sleeve, begging, "What has happened, Petie? What has happened?"

Peterson told her briefly, out of the side of his mouth, the side farthest from the sergeant.

"Miss Haddie? . . ." she cried softly. "Oh! Petie, where is Larry?"

Sergeant O'Nara answered.

"Look, Elva," he said, "we've got a job to do. Larry's around somewhere. Say, Hooper's out in the country, if you'd like to pinch-hit for him, and take down in shorthand what these people have to say, it would help a lot. We'd be glad to have you. But you mustn't butt in!"

"I'll run up and get a notebook," she said. "I may be a little rusty in my speed—but I think I can do it."

"You'll be fine," the sergeant said shortly. "Meet us in the dining room in nothing flat."

Lights were on in all the halls and downstairs rooms. Elva saw no one as she ran up the stairs for her book, but the door into Miss Haddie's room was open. Miss Haddie's desk lamp was still burning. The curtains hung down wet and heavy, and the window was still open. The room smelled dank, heavy. Miss Haddie's loud-ticking clock on the desk was tick-tocking merrily. Third floor lights burned, too—she ran up the steps to see if Williams was up there.

His rooms were empty also, the bridge canvas was uncovered, the display lights on. There was a Mexican blue-glass decanter . . . Two blue wine glasses. Two or three paper napkins by the glasses . . . A Mexican tray made of painted pottery. "They're all downstairs," she thought, clutching her notebook. "I must keep calm. If my hand shakes I won't be able to read my notes . . ."

Something terrible had been going on right along and nobody had known, nobody had even guessed. She heard O'Nara's voice, shouting up through the well of the stairs, "Elva? Coming? Are you ready up there?"

The Pilsbury dining room, called in the days of its glory, the "back drawing room," was of ample and spacious size. The front drawing room served now as a living room. The dining room had a long panel of windows facing the garden. A tall china and crystal cupboard stood beside the south wall, against a single window. A center refectory table was spread with a handsome cloth of heavy lace. Surprise welled up in Elva's eyes when her glance fell upon the lace tablecloth. The cloth was a Christmas present to Miss Pilsbury from an aunt in Ireland. Up to now it had been used only on special occasions. Sergeant O'Nara had laid not only his flashlight and notebook on the lace but his damp cap also, and that was just too bad, thought Elva. She sat down at one side of the table, opened her notebook, and wrote the names of those present in tight little longhand letters: Dr. Young, Mr. Morrison, Mrs. Morrison, Mrs. Douglas, Mr. Sylvester. As she finished with the names, Joey came in from the butler's pantry and leaned against the doorframe. His thin body was shaking with fright.

Elva knew that these people did not have to answer any questions that Sergeant O'Nara might put to them. But she was quite sure they would. They were under the knife-edge of shock and fear and would probably not think of openly challenging him.

Dr. Young sat in the chair by the china cupboard. He was the only one, Elva thought, who appeared normal and unconcerned. He was tired-looking and kept yawning, as if he had not slept well in a long time. Robert Morrison sat beside him. Morrison was a big man, with massive shoulders and head, and with a cold and unfriendly though handsome face. He wore the aura of a successful businessman. The first thing you saw as you came into Plumhill, from the Hudson side, was the huge sign, "Morrison Shoes. Sold Everywhere." The factory covered more than two blocks on Gately, near Sixth and Seventh Streets. Lena Morrison sat next to her husband. But there was a wide space between their chairs, which neither made any effort to erase.

"About Miss Pilsbury, Dr. Young," O'Nara said, coming back again to the table. "Will she be able to come down?"

"Here I am, Sergeant," Miss Pilsbury said from the doorway. Her face was colorless but she seemed calm. "I had a touch of colic this afternoon and had undressed to be comfortable. Took me a few minutes to dress again. I'm feeling better. And I'm here to do what I can. Dr. Young has told me about the dreadful thing."

"Please make yourself comfortable, Miss Pilsbury," said O'Nara. "I just want to ask a few questions to get started—Where is that painter, Williams?"

"Saw him crossing the street with Larry Moore," said Peterson, thrusting his head in from the hall.

"Okay, we'll see him later." The sergeant picked up his notebook. "As you all know, Miss Haddie was struck down near the weigela bush. On your back drive, Mr. Morrison. She was killed by a blow from a furnace shaker that belonged to this house. Joey says the shaker had been in Miss Pilsbury's garage for several weeks waiting for the junk man. This is murder and apparently ties up to one of these two houses."

There was an uneasy silence.

"But not to the Gallery, Sergeant," said Mr. Sylvester. His pompadour of thick golden hair stood up like ripe grain in a field and there was an angry glint in his eyes. "When Joey said out there that he'd been helping me, he spoke the truth. A few minutes before ten he went out the back door. We'd been unpacking the Batista exhibit in the basement. I had just come up from checking the windows when I heard the commotion across the alley. I'd like to go. That's all I know. Couldn't tell you any more if I stayed a week."

"Okay, Mr. Sylvester," said O'Nara. "We'll see you later if we need you."

Mrs. Douglas sat in the French armchair beside Miss Pilsbury and she let out a groan as Sylvester walked from the room. Sylvester paid not the slightest attention to her. But O'Nara looked over with a perplexed expression on his face.

"You let him go," she said bitterly. "How do you know he's not the murderer? How do you know?"

"Now, now, Mrs. Douglas, we'll go into that later," he said easily, and turned to Morrison.

Morrison kept smoothing back his dark, thinning hair with his hand and Elva, looking at him, thought, "*I've never seen him do that before. . . . He's as nervous as a bat!*"

"At the time this thing happened, Mr. Morrison, what were you doing?" asked O'Nara.

"As I've already said, I went down to the Miller Drugstore for cigarettes," Morrison answered, and brushed his hair again. "Then I walked over to the park, where the fiesta was. I stood on the sidewalk a few minutes."

"See anybody you knew?"

"No. It had begun to sprinkle a little, so I didn't go into the park where the crowds were, but turned back. It started to pour suddenly and I ran for the vestibule of that laundry on Second Street, stayed there until the worst was over."

"Anybody see you in the vestibule, Mr. Morrison?"

"Not unless it was somebody in a passing car. The rain didn't last long, so only two or three cars went by. As Sylvester said, I could stay here a week and couldn't add anything to what I've said. I'm as wet as a fish and would like to go home and get into some dry clothes."

"Mr. Morrison, you left for the drugstore at what time?"

"Nine-fifteen. When I went into the hall to get my hat I noticed the clock."

"You reached the drugstore at what time?"

"About nine thirty-five. I started back this way at nine-forty, approximately. Maybe a little later." He brushed his hand over his hair, said impatiently, "You can check with Tom Underhill at the drugstore about my being there."

"How long had you known the—er—dead woman, Miss Haddie?"

"Rather an asinine question, isn't it? When she lived here before I knew her. Naturally. As I think everybody in town knows, she's my wife's cousin."

"You don't have to get huffy, Mr. Morrison," said O'Nara. "These questions are just routine. When did you last see Miss Haddie?"

"How do I know? People living next door to each other naturally see one another often. Going by the house, I mean, or in the garden. Or on the porches."

"What I mean, Mr. Morrison," said O'Nara smoothly, "is when did you last converse with your wife's cousin?"

Elva glanced up at Morrison during the pause that followed. His narrow dark eyes were staring at O'Nara as if he were suddenly hypnotized.

"It's impossible to say when I spoke to her last," he said, breaking the silence. "It—I—"

The new pause was broken by Mrs. Morrison's pleading, whispery voice. "Tell him the truth, Robert. That we have had nothing to do with Gwendoline for years."

Morrison shifted uneasily in his chair. "Yes, that's true, O'Nara," he said in conciliatory tones. "We've had no personal contacts at all. Everybody knows that, too."

Elva, listening and taking notes feverishly, thought a stir passed through the group, as if taut nerves had suddenly relaxed.

"Well," said O'Nara suavely, "did you talk to Miss Haddie today?"

A flush crept up from Morrison's neck to his cheeks and temples. "Damn it, I told you, didn't I? No. In plain words I did not talk to her today."

"Just a minute, please," O'Nara said as Morrison stood up. "Where the body was found, Mr. Morrison, where were you?"

"I assume I was on my way home. At least, four or five persons were standing out there in the garden when I came up. Shall I make an affidavit?"

"You must understand, Mr. Morrison, that we have to ask foolish-sounding questions, and check on everything," O'Nara said formally. "You can see yourself, I think, that, for the moment at least you may appear in a poor light. For the reason that you have no alibi, and you had sufficient time to return here instead of going to the fiesta, and meeting your cousin on your driveway. It's that sort of thing we must check on when we start out on a thing like this."

"Of all the damned impudence," muttered Morrison savagely, and walked toward the door. "If you want me, Lena," he said, "have Joey call me."

O'Nara began talking again. What he wanted to know, he said, was how many persons were in the Pilsbury house at the time Miss Haddie was killed. They had established the time of the killing as approximately nine-forty to nine-fifty. "Who was in the house at that time?" he said, looking from face to face. "Dr. Young, as Miss Pilsbury was resting in her room, perhaps you can tell us?"

Dr. Young raised his tired eyes and looked steadily at the sergeant. "I couldn't say definitely. The Moores weren't here. Miss Pilsbury didn't come in to dinner. As her physician, I had asked her not to

eat fats of any kind. I suggested she have some dry toast and hot milk and go to bed. My room is the second-floor room at the curve of the hall. I happened to see Aggie, the cook, through my window as she left shortly after dinner. Miss Haddie was in her room at eight-thirty, Mr. Williams—”

“Hold on a minute, Doctor,” O’Nara broke in. “How do you know Miss Haddie was in her room at eight-thirty?”

“I stayed downstairs after dinner to hear the news broadcast at eight-fifteen. I came upstairs as soon as it was over. When I reached the upper hall, Miss Haddie came to her door and spoke to me. It was eight-thirty.”

“What did she say?”

“She asked me if I knew whether Williams was in his room. I said I didn’t know. She said she had a date with him. As soon as she wrote a letter.”

“What else did she say?”

“That was all. I didn’t want to linger to talk, so I went on to my room.”

“You didn’t like her, Doctor?”

“Not particularly. I didn’t let it disturb me, of course.”

“No? . . .” said O’Nara slowly. “Well, can you tell us, Doctor, if Miss Haddie had on those beads of hers when she spoke to you?”

“I didn’t notice them. But I imagine she did. She had them on at dinner. I noticed her wiping them with her napkin.”

“She got ’em in her soup,” said Joey. “I was lookin’ right at her.”

“Shut up, Joey,” said the sergeant. “Well, Doctor, do you think now that Williams was in his room?”

“I don’t know. When I heard Joey calling for help, and ran down, Williams was already down. He slides the banisters a great deal. He could have got down all right. Ahead of me, I mean.”

“Maybe I can tell you that, Mist’ Sergeant,” began Joey. “When I comes—”

“Shut up, Joey,” said the sergeant. “What about Mrs. Douglas, Doctor?”

“I’m able to answer myself, thank you,” broke in Mrs. Douglas in a hollow voice. “Certainly I was in my room! With the state of my health, naturally I’d be in my room!”

“Thank you, Mrs. Douglas. Let me finish with Dr. Young, please. Now, Doctor, between the time Miss Haddie spoke to you at eight-

thirty, and the time Joey called for help, what were you doing?"

For the first time Dr. Young seemed confused. But just for a moment. "I was writing a paper on Periston, a German synthetic chemical, for the C. M. S.," he said with a mirthless smile.

"Well, that'll be all for now, Doctor. We'll call you later if we need you. Joey, suppose you go to the kitchen and make some coffee? That'll be okay, won't it, Miss Pilsbury?"

"Yes, indeed, Sergeant," Miss Pilsbury said. "Aggie always keeps two or three quart fruit jars full overnight so that anybody who comes down for early breakfast can warm it quickly. Just heat it up, Joey."

Miss Pilsbury reached for her workbag, which hung over the arm of Mrs. Douglas' chair. Taking out her knitting, a half-finished table-mat made of white yarn, she calmly began slipping loops from one steel needle to the other.

6

SERGEANT O'NARA PUSHED his newly-sharpened pencil behind his ear, remembered, jerked it down, examined it minutely from clean eraser to long fine point. There was something about the silence of these people when they were not answering your questions . . . Normally, they were people that made you hold a respectful distance, but this was murder. Even if they were innocent, the last one of them, this murder in their garden leveled them, didn't it?

"Now," he said briskly, "what can you tell us, Miss Pilsbury?"

She let her knitting needles rest. "Not much, I'm afraid. I lay in bed reading. It's quiet in my room. What used to be the library I now use for my private sitting room and the small room behind it is my bedroom. After Aggie brought in my toast and hot milk, I swallowed the pills Dr. Young left, picked up my book. I was still reading when Dr. Young knocked on my door to tell me what had happened."

"You heard no scream, or any sort of noise, from the garden?"

"No. Nothing. I'm away from the garden, you see."

"How long had Miss Haddie been with you?"

"About four weeks."

"Didn't she used to live here? Over on Schuyler, wasn't it?"

"She lived there part of the time. Hadn't been here for years. She came back while I was down in Philadelphia, in early May. Elva was in charge and let her have the room. Gwendoline should really have gone to her aunt, Mrs. Walters."

"Was Miss Haddie liked by the people in this house?"

"Well, she wasn't a favorite. She certainly wasn't with me, although we got along without open friction. She was always saying nasty things to Joey. I didn't like that."

"Now. Miss Pilsbury, you hadn't ought to say that," Joey wailed, as he rolled in the tea wagon. "I never have nothin' agin dead people, I—"

"Shut up, Joey," said O'Nara. "Let's have our coffee now."

Elva poured the coffee into the cups and Joey passed the tray around the room.

"How many roomers have you, Miss Pilsbury?" O'Nara asked as he stirred his coffee.

"I have a suite of three rooms on the third," she said. "Mr. Williams has that. On the second floor are Dr. Young, the Moores and Mrs. Douglas. And Gwendoline Haddie's room, of course. I call my roomers paying guests, Sergeant, for I treat them as guests. There is one room on the second floor I don't rent. That is my dear sister's room. She died a few years ago. I don't rent Elida's room."

"Miss Pilsbury, your position here is naturally different from that of the others. You're in tune with the house, so to speak. You'd notice or even feel things that the others might not. Tell me, please, did you notice anything different in the past few days? Any tense-ness, say?"

"I think I see what you mean, Sergeant. As my dear father used to say, was anything 'off hinge'? No. As far as I know everything was the same as usual."

"Thank you," he said. "You may go back to bed, if you wish. I have just a few questions to ask the others. Then we'll be through for tonight."

"I'd like to stay," said Miss Pilsbury and took up her knitting. "There might be something I could do to help."

O'Nara walked around the table toward Mrs. Morrison, who sat hunched in her chair with her thin fingers clasped tightly. Her face, with its dim rouge spots, was as white as paper.

"Now, Mrs. Morrison," said O'Nara, "did you talk with Miss Haddie today, or recently? And do you know whether your cousin had any enemies?"

"No, I've not talked with her for a long time," she said in her husky whispery voice. "It's like we told you, Sergeant. And I don't know if she had enemies or not."

"During the years she lived here, her girlhood days, say, was there anybody who hated her enough to want to kill her when and if the opportunity came?"

"I don't want to bore you by speaking of it again," she said. "But my cousin and I were not on speaking terms. So I couldn't know."

"How long has this coolness been going on?"

"Ten or twelve years. Maybe longer."

"What was the trouble about?"

"Family matters. It had nothing to do with this terrible thing."

Sergeant O'Nara fiddled with his pencil, but watched Mrs. Morrison's face. "When did you see your cousin last?"

"I—er—at a minute or two past nine forty-five tonight." She clasped and unclasped her thin, ringed fingers. "At eleven minutes to ten, to be exact."

O'Nara clucked under his breath. Mrs. Douglas gave an audible gasp and Miss Pilsbury's knitting sagged in her lap.

"Where was she then?" snapped O'Nara.

Mrs. Morrison pressed herself against her chair, said faintly, "She was peeping through my living room window. I'd pulled it down because it was going to rain. I happened to glance up at the clock on the mantel. And saw her in the mirror above the radio."

For a moment O'Nara did not move. Then he took his handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his face.

"So she was looking in at your window at eleven minutes to ten? What did you do about it, Mrs. Morrison?"

"Nothing." She was shaking now, from head to foot. "I thought she should go to the front door. And ring the bell. If she wanted to speak to me."

"Lena ought to have a bromide, Sergeant," panted Mrs. Douglas. "In the state of my health, my nerves won't—"

"Please, Mrs. Douglas," said O'Nara carefully. "Was that the first time your cousin had peeped in through your window, Mrs. Morrison?"

"N-no." Her voice was faint and stammering. "I saw her on Thursday night. I went into the dining room that night. The lights were off. The switch is over by the butler's pantry. I had to cross the room to reach it. I saw her. Coming up from the rear garden. I waited and didn't put on a light. She came to the bay windows. And stood there a minute or two. Then went back."

"She opened the gate into the alley and returned by the alley?"

"No. There's an opening in the rear part of the bridal wreath hedge. She went through the hedge."

There was a tight silence, broken only by the sound of Elva's turning the page of her notebook.

"Who was in the living room that first night when she peeped in?"

"Robert. My husband. He sat with his back to the window. Reading the evening paper."

"Mrs. Morrison, why did your cousin peep through your window?"

Mrs. Morrison dabbed at her mouth with a lace-edged handkerchief. "She was always talking to Roberta in the garden. As soon as school was out I took Roberta to Boston. To my mother's. I suppose Gwendoline was looking to see if Roberta had returned. Just curiosity, I think. She knew, too, it would annoy me. If I saw her."

"Mrs. Morrison, what theory have you about your cousin's death tonight? Who do you think killed her?"

"It must have been somebody who saw her come to the window. And waited for her under the weigela bush. Somebody from the alley, I mean. A tramp, maybe."

"You shouldn't have let Sylvester go," moaned Mrs. Douglas.

"Please!" said O'Nara patiently. "Now, Mrs. Morrison, you were alone in the house. You could have slipped out the kitchen door, say, while she was at the window and have reached the weigela bush in time to have struck her down. Isn't that what you did, Mrs. Morrison? You don't have to answer, of course. But you could have killed your cousin quite easily! You had time to do it. And the opportunity. And the motive."

"Now, you can't bully her, Sergeant, and you know it," broke in Miss Pillsbury angrily. "You can't! I'll report you!"

"I didn't have time to have brought the furnace shaker from Patricia Pillsbury's garage, Sergeant." Mrs. Morrison's voice was suddenly firm. "Gwendoline was not at the window long enough for that. I didn't kill her. If I'd wanted to kill her, I would not have hit her. I would have shot her, Sergeant O'Nara."

"But a shot would have brought people out of their houses, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose it would. But I did not kill her!"

"Well, to return to the window-peeping. That was approximately at nine forty-eight, say? You remained seated? Without betraying the fact that you saw her?"

"Yes. The wind was already pretty strong. But I heard her come up. She stepped on a twig, or hit something. I heard her plainly."

"But you actually saw her, too?"

"Oh, yes. In the mirror over the radio. I was sitting in the same chair that Mr. Morrison was sitting in when she came on Thursday night. And I could see her in the mirror."

"And if you saw her in the mirror tonight, then, in all probability, Mr. Morrison, sitting in the same chair on Thursday night, saw her, too. Did he speak of it? Did he see her?"

"No!" Her body seemed to go limp in the chair again. "No! He didn't see her. I'm sure!"

Mrs. Morrison made no move to leave the room, although O'Nara dismissed her with a curt, "Thank you. That will be all tonight." She sat rigidly in her chair, biting at her lips forlornly.

O'Nara turned to Mrs. Douglas. "It's getting very late," he said. "I won't keep you people much longer. I know about your quarrel with Mr. Sylvester, Mrs. Douglas. It has nothing to do with this affair, so let's not go into it. The only question I want to ask you is this: Did you, by any chance, converse with Miss Haddie today?"

"Yes, I did," she said angrily. "I'd hate to tell you what I think of the way you're conducting this thing, Sergeant. But I told your mother years ago you wouldn't amount to a row of pins! As to what Gwendoline said today, she merely complained about nobody in the house liking her. Said we all hated her. And were jealous of her. I ask you, who cared about her golden hair? We could all have blondined our hair if we'd wanted to."

"I think I'll just say good night to you ladies," O'Nara said. "Thank you very much."

He went swiftly to the hall door and said to Peterson, "We'll take a look at Miss Haddie's room now, then we'll call it a day. Elva, you show us the room. But I'll make my own notes."

As one went up the stairway Miss Haddie's room was on the right. The pink-shaded bisque lamp was still burning.

It was a comfortable-looking room, with double French doors opening on a neat little balcony. But the old and worn furniture gave it a faded look. The bed was spread carefully, the corners of a blue taffeta counterpane were nicely tucked in, the chairs were placed evenly. Clearly, Miss Haddie had been a very neat and orderly person. A vase of lilacs was on the harpsichord and filled the room with a sweet fragrance. The net curtains at the opened west window hung wet and limp. Everything about the room seemed to indicate that the occupant had merely stepped out and would return in a moment.

O'Nara went over to the harpsichord. The instrument was open, with the stool out. As if waiting for the performer to sit down. A candelabra with pink and lavender and blue candles was on one end of the harpsichord. He turned, went to the desk, began rummaging about with tiny forceps. The papers in the pigeonholes were receipted bills. The desk drawers contained some loose envelopes, a few sheets of fine writing paper, and some pencils. O'Nara thumped the wood of the desk carefully. There seemed to be no secret drawers . . .

"We'll have Higgins make a few prints . . . Obviously, Peterson, she went out of this room expecting to return shortly . . . the storm came up quickly . . ." He turned to Elva, watching from the doorway. "Could you type that stuff before you go to bed? Good girl! Peterson will wait for it. There'll be somebody around all night. I'll have to . . ."

The sergeant went down the steps without finishing his sentence.

Elva, clutching her notebook, watched while Peterson locked Miss Haddie's door.

"Listen, Elva, you hadn't oughtta look so white," Peterson said when he turned, key in hand. "Before you start typing, come down and get a drink, or something."

She followed him down, got a coke out of the icebox, and drank it. On her way back she saw Williams and Mr. Dixon. They were

standing on the front walk in the glare of the door light. Larry and O'Nara were there, too, in the shadows. As she turned toward the stairs, she heard O'Nara's voice . . .

"Understand, you're not to leave town, Mr. Williams," he said.

7

ROBINS IN THE MAPLES, singing. Ordinarily, no amount of bird-tweeting or caroling at dawn would disturb Elva, young and healthy and a deep sleeper, but now the sound tugged at her ears unmercifully. She opened her eyes, forgetful of everything but the indescribable hour of daybreak, when the sun, as yet unseen, sends his warmth ahead like a gift.

For a moment her drowsy thoughts were of the dawn only. Suddenly a chill ran through her. What was it, what had happened, what terrible, awful thing . . . somebody killed in the garden . . . yes, Miss Haddie, poor Miss Haddie! This terrible thing when birds sang, when the world seemed so gentle and peaceful . . . She sniffed the air, tasted it. The scent of the lilacs below her window was almost unbearably sweet.

She lay there retracing her part in what happened after Miss Haddie's body was found . . . She had taken notes for Sergeant O'Nara, and now she must be mixing facts and dreams. Yes, that must be what she was doing, for when she came up last night to get her notebook she saw that Miss Haddie's door was open, the lights were on, the window open. Mrs. Douglas' lights burned, too, and when she ran up to Verne Williams' suite, his lights burned, all that, yes, but not the other, the door to the dead sister's room, kept locked always, could not have been slightly ajar, that surely was a dream. The key to that room was kept on the ledge over the door . . .

Suddenly a conviction struck her with astonishing force. The thing was not a dream. Elida's room, always locked, kept unchanged. One of the first things that Gwendoline Haddie had done was to find the key, unlock the door, and examine the room. After all, there

was nothing mysterious about Elida's room. She remembered Miss Haddie's laughing, scornful words, "Curiosity, my pet, eats into my heart like a nasty worm . . ." It might be, Elva thought, that Miss Haddie had gone back into Elida's room last night, which would account for Miss Haddie's whereabouts for a part of the time, at least, between eight-thirty and the time she was killed.

Elva looked over at Larry. He was sleeping soundly, he looked like a little boy lying on the pillows. She wanted to kiss him.

She got up, drew on her crêpe robe, noiselessly opened the door into the hall, which was full of gray shadows, paused to listen. She moved soundlessly to her right . . . and found the dead sister's door closed, but not latched.

She pushed the door gently and it fell back. To her astonishment the small night lamp by the bed was burning, its pale amber glow falling over the bed eerily. A bouquet of lilacs filled the room with a heavy fragrance. The explanation of the bouquet was simple. Miss Pilsbury always kept fresh flowers in Elida's room when the garden flowers were blooming. She had probably brought the lilacs in the afternoon before, and for once, had forgotten to lock the door. But why did the lamp burn? . . . She locked the door to the room, but did not remove the key.

Back in her own room, she slipped into bed. She was still sleepy, she thought, yawning.

She seemed to have dozed only a few moments when she felt rather than heard a sound.

Swinging over in bed, she saw Larry in the act of fastening his collar before the dressing room chiffonier, his hair steamy from his bath. It was twenty minutes to six . . .

"Hello, Puss," he said softly, stepping into the room. "Didn't wake you when I came in last night, you were sleeping so soundly."

She raised up on her elbow.

"Look, darling, what are you doing? Where are you going so early?"

"Just routine stuff. Running out to nearby towns to interview tramps they picked up for us. There are several suspects, but nothing too definite. You stay in bed for awhile—I'll eat down at Wisner's."

"I took most of the interviews for O'Nara," she said. "I believe a tramp did it. Absolutely."

"Could be. We're checking all angles. O'Nara thinks it's either

Mrs. Morrison or Joey. There have been any number of kids going screwy since the war and killing with little or no motive. In some ways, it looks bad for Joey. It looks bad for Mrs. Morrison, too. A few hours may break the case."

Elva gazed at him solemnly. "Go on, Sherlock," she said.

"That's as far as I can go, honey. We think Miss Haddie was murdered by somebody in one of these two houses. Everything points to that. Still, we are investigating the tramp angle, too."

"But you don't think it was a tramp?"

"No. We also know that Mrs. Morrison hated her cousin. And we think her cousin probably hated her. As to Joey's story, it's as weak as Aggie's tea! Joey not only had the opportunity, he had a good, red-blooded motive. Revenge! There was ill feeling between him and Miss Haddie. Especially since yesterday."

"Who do you mean, Larry?"

"Didn't you know Joey and Miss Haddie had quarreled over the harpsichord and she threatened his job?"

"I didn't know they quarrelled yesterday . . ." She was silent a moment. "Why aren't you looking more to the Professor for help? After all, he's a famous person, he's known for that work he did in New Orleans. Why don't you beg him to come in on this?"

"It's Sergeant O'Nara's case, not mine, Mrs. Moore. I don't like that look in your eyes."

"What look?"

"That hunted, harried look, Mrs. Moore. Go back to bed, like a good girl. Remember, I like sweet homebodies, who love to cook and sew a fine seam. I don't like gals who try to take over their husbands' jobs."

"Kiss me goodbye, darling," Elva replied languidly, rubbing her nose over the rough tweed of his coat. "See you at dinner. Be a good boy."

"Now, remember," he said. "I'm wearing the pants!"

She waited until the door clicked behind Larry. She slipped into her robe again, hurried to the window at the front end of the hall, looked across the street at Mr. Dixon's house.

The sun had reached the street now. Mr. Dixon's house looked awake, the shades were high at the windows. The Professor was up, at work, maybe.

She ran back to her bath, threw in some perfumed bath-salts, hopped in . . .

When she came downstairs it was fifteen to seven. She carried the carbon copies of the interviews made the night before. She was impatient to have Mr. Dixon's opinion. As she crossed over the curb toward his front door, Joey came up behind her.

"Mornin', Miss Elva," Joey said. "Comin' to fix Mist' Dixon's breakfast. He always gits up early."

Elva laid the carbon copies on the table in front of Mr. Dixon.

"Read 'em while I start the toast," she said, for the smell of bacon frying came from the kitchen.

Mr. Dixon nodded, looked down at the book he was reading. His long fingers were tapping the pages.

"Here was Bergson predicting the atomic bomb years ago," he said. "Speaking of war, he says at the pace at which science is moving that the day is not far off when one of the two adversaries, through some secret process which he was holding in reserve, will have the means of annihilating his opponent, and the vanquished may vanish from the face of the earth. What our State Department doesn't realize, my dear, is that science and scientists are interested in *things*, as Madame Curie so aptly puts it, in purely abstract laws and theories, and not in people—they know no more about the political world we live in than babes! They'll destroy us—if they haven't already done so."

Elva swallowed some hot water and lemon juice, slipped the toast over.

"Look, Professor," she begged, "don't let's talk about the atomic bomb, or science or scientists, or Madame Curie. Let's talk of who killed Miss Haddie. I want you to tell me what you think. You ought to read the interviews first, but tell me what's in your mind and read the interviews later."

Mr. Dixon looked at her querulously. Obviously from the pucker that slid in between his eyes he was in a difficult mood.

"All I know is that Joey came howling at my door last night and led me to where Gwendoline's body lay under the bushes. I have no other facts."

"Well, how does it seem to you? You heard what Jovev had to say."

"It seems like a cold-blooded and ghastly murder."

"You can't forget, can you, Professor, that she was an old friend

of yours? Personally, I think it was a tramp. What do you think of that theory?"

"My ideas are as tenuous as a Topper character. Here's another place in Bergson—"

"Professor, aren't you going to work on this case?"

"Good heavens, why should I work on the case?"

"Is that the way to treat an old friend and pupil of Oakwood? Be a good sport and tell me what I must do. I've got to get it straightened out in my own mind at least, Professor!"

Mr. Dixon reached for his orange juice.

"Generally speaking," he said, "in a case like this you scratch away the customs of religion and of society and you thus uncover the primitive mind, the jungle fellow, with his stone and club. It was the primitive mind, freed for a moment of its layers of civilization, that killed Gwendoline. That's as far as I can venture."

"Where does that get us?" Elva said stubbornly. "Go on—tell me."

"All right. Take everybody in the two houses who had the opportunity. The means was at hand, standing in the corner of the garage. In theory, strip these persons of their religious and social taboos, find one with a motive strong enough, and you have found the murderer."

"I'd hoped . . ." she began, and stopped.

"That's tangible enough, isn't it?" he demanded.

She shook her head, sighed.

"May I read the interview notes to you, Professor?"

"One has to be polite," Mr. Dixon said, folding himself neatly under the table and reaching for a slice of toast. "Proceed."

She read the notes slowly, straight through, without pause or comment.

8

ALL RIGHT," Mr. Dixon said. "Why do you think Mrs. Morrison killed her? Doesn't fit in with what you were pleased to call your tramp theory."

"Why, I haven't said I thought Mrs. Morrison guilty," Elva said dumbfounded. "Why that remark?"

Mr. Dixon made a cradle of thin bacon on his plate, slid an egg into the center, gave a nod and a smile to Joey.

"You were oddly dramatic when you read her replies to the sergeant's questions," he said. "Drama on the surface is always significant of what lies underneath."

Elva sat in silence for a moment.

"Mrs. Morrison made no secret of her hate for Miss Haddie," she admitted weakly. "Still, I'm holding to the tramp theory. Holding firmly."

"Tramp not indicated," Mr. Dixon grunted impatiently.

"Because he didn't take the beads?" She was suddenly scornful. "He probably thought those beads were dime-store glass. Besides, he took them off, didn't he? Dropped them, probably when he heard Joey's footsteps. Started to run, you know."

"Dismiss the beads. What you can be certain of is that he didn't take Gwendoline's diamond ring. He would have grabbed the diamond first thing."

"Oh, the engagement ring? . . ." gasped Elva. "Well, why couldn't he have been on the point of taking it when he heard Joey's footsteps?"

"Anything under heaven is possible. My private opinion is—useless, as it's unsupported by facts—that a tramp who had struck down a victim wouldn't be cheated of his diamond so quickly and easily. Having suffered the deed and its possible consequences, he must have the reward. He'd probably have struck Joey down, too, and so finished his job."

Elva toyed for a moment with the idea of a tramp looking up from his victim at the sound of Joey's footsteps. Joey, she reflected, was so black he couldn't be seen in the dark. You could only hear him . . . coming at you out of the black silence . . .

"Well, Professor, what shall we do now?"

"I always like to read while I'm waiting for breakfast. I've read. Then I like to eat. I'm eating. As soon as I have finished that delightful occupation, I'll begin on my book. My chapter on "Characterization" must be started at once."

Elva laughed, but looked at him in frank disapproval.

"Really, Professor, you're as cold-blooded as a fish! You ought

to be doing something on this case. Miss Haddie was a good friend of yours, as I've said before. Is this any way to treat a friend?"

"Had I dreamed that Gwendoline was in danger, there would have been nothing in my power I would not have done to save her. But it's too late to save Gwendoline now."

"I understand, Professor. I'm a beast. Please forgive me."

"Well, my dear, what is it you want to ask me?" he said with an audible sigh.

"Tell me more about 'motive.' And don't sigh so loudly. Remember, Professor, you've got company for breakfast. It isn't polite."

Mr. Dixon unfolded his long legs, pushed back his chair.

"All right. Take hate. Hate in itself is not a murder motive, remember. Hate is strong but it's not strong enough for a person to risk disgrace and death. But hate plus *fear* is one of the strongest motives. All right. First analyze Mrs. Morrison's feeling of hatred for her cousin. Then try to find what particular or special fear was connected with this feeling of hate. . . . By the way . . . do you know why she hated Gwendoline?"

"I've heard there was a lot of jealousy when they were girls. Miss Haddie was the pretty one, Mrs. Morrison had the money."

"I see . . . Were they much together? Live in the same house? And that sort of thing?"

"They lived across the street from each other. When Miss Haddie's mother died, she went to live with her father's sister, Mrs. John Walters, over on Hill Street. It seems, though, she spent a lot of time at the Morrisons' house. Finally, as you know, she went abroad. And didn't come back. Until now."

Yes, she went abroad to Paris, I saw her, looking like a rain-drenched flower . . . after an illness. Mr. Dixon brushed his hand across his eyes, brought himself up.

"An interview with the aunt is indicated," he said. "She might give you something to work on."

"Splendid. We can take some flowers, can't we? I used to know her when I was a little girl."

"I have no intention of going with you, Elva," Mr. Dixon said wearily.

They both listened while the clock struck eight.

"Oh. Professor. I'll drive over, it will only take a few minutes,"

Elva begged. "I know I'm terrible," she added, her voice filled with laughter at Mr. Dixon's woebegone face as he grumblingly capitulated.

Gwendoline's aunt, Mrs. Walters, was a pale slim woman of perhaps fifty-eight or sixty. She had an abundance of faded yellowish hair, neatly curled, and a pair of faded blue eyes. As early as it was, she wore a street dress of blue dotted Swiss.

They presented the flowers, offered their sympathy. Mrs. Walters said she remembered Mr. Dixon. She asked if she couldn't have the maid bring in a tray of coffee and rolls?

"Oh, dear," she said when they were seated in the living room, "Gwendoline used to call you 'Totem,' didn't she, Professor?"

"Short for Totem Pole," he said pleasantly. "Favorite malapropos with the students."

Mrs. Walters seemed slightly taken aback.

"Oh, dear, was that it, *really*?" She pushed at the sides of her neat hair, "Although I've seen so *little* of Gwendoline since she came home, Professor, you will understand that this is a great shock, a very great shock."

Mr. Dixon spoke appropriate words of sympathy. To Elva's relief he took charge of the situation, came down to brass tacks at once.

"Gwendoline had enemies, Mrs. Walters," he said. "If you could tell us who these enemies were, it would help very much in finding the person who is responsible for this frightful thing."

Mrs. Walters' eyes had been fixed on him steadily while he spoke, but as he finished speaking, her eyes dropped.

"Oh, dear, I wouldn't know about that, would I?" she said in a flurried tone. "It's just as I told the reporters last night, and that police sergeant, I've seen so *little* of my niece for twelve years. I invited her to come here when she returned, but she preferred to live at Patricia Pilsbury's. You live there, too, Elva. You should know more about it than I."

Mrs. Walters sat there shaking her head, while words were running through Mr. Dixon's mind. *She knows something but intends to keep the knowledge to herself.*

The thing annoyed him.

"The years dim things so, that is true, Mrs. Walters," he said

calmly. "I find myself trying to recall Gwendoline's college days a little more clearly. I knew her quite well, very well indeed, but there is something . . . over in one corner of my mind . . . I can't quite put my finger on it. An unhappy love affair, was it? . . . Could you help me on that?"

"Oh, dear, I'm afraid not, Professor Totem. I mean—you see, I know *so* little."

Mr. Dixon asked her some questions, and she gave vague replies. Oh, dear, yes, Gwendoline had been a spoiled, selfish girl, although it was difficult to know why, for no one would take the blame, certainly Gwendoline's mother had seemed to be strict enough. Gwendoline had been difficult right along, all through childhood—like a bud that had been unable to expand properly. Unhappy, of course—was it not always so? An undisciplined child was always an unhappy child, yes? Since Gwendoline's return from England, though, she had seemed quite happy, she really had, and it was too sad, too sad indeed . . .

And that was all Mrs. Walters had to say.

Later, when Mr. Dixon and Elva were driving back along the pink and white garlanded terraces, Mr. Dixon said they would put the microscope on the aunt and see what they got.

"There's something very definite concerning Gwendoline's past that she knows," he said. "It kept peering out at us from the depths of the good lady's blue eyes. All right. Why does she wish to conceal whatever it is? Obviously, the revelation is something that would hurt her pride to have known. Her probable line of reasoning is that it's too late to save Gwendoline, so why rattle the little bones in the closet? She reasons that way about it because she wishes it that way. That's the pattern of the human mind."

"You think," murmured Elva, "that if we knew what that was—that thing that's back in her mind, I mean—we'd get the clue to why Miss Haddie was killed?"

"The thing has been done, hasn't it? Why was it done? We know there is hate, but we don't know what the fear was. Granting, of course, that Mrs. Morrison is the guilty person. No man can out-run his shadow . . . and where there is fear, it runs along, follows a man, very much as his shadow does."

Elva, who was driving, yanked the car around a corner sharply.

"Well, that would let Joey out, wouldn't it? I'm afraid Joey's in for some tough days, Professor."

"All right. Let's ask ourselves what motive Joey could have had to kill Gwendoline?"

"Well, there's the quarrel about the harpsichord. And the fear he would lose his job."

"Weak, my dear. Very weak. The harpsichord was probably old stuff with Joey. He has other jobs. Would he kill a woman for five dollars a week, plus a sleeping room over a garage, and a few meals?"

"No," said Elva promptly, vigorously. "No, he wouldn't. It must have been a—a—"

"Tramp," finished Mr. Dixon with a deep sigh.

By nine o'clock Mr. Dixon was squared away, ready to write, but instead he watched the kitten lap her cream and let his thoughts dwell upon Gwendoline. He could think of nothing but the lovely lines of her heart-shaped face, of the beauty of her golden hair. Why had she come back to her old home for this rendezvous with death?

Suddenly there were other questions. Why did she not keep her appointment with Williams? Why did she go to the Morrison window? Who followed her into the garden? . . .

What about Williams, supposedly waiting for her in his studio? . . . And what about Dr. Young?

Why had Dr. Young sent Miss Pilsbury to bed? Was it so that her sharp eyes would not be at the garden windows? . . .

Mr. Dixon took a deep breath. Dash it all, this was no way to write a book. Gwendoline had been like one of those wild flowers you find growing in some dark wood, pretty enough, but without substance or fragrance. She was now a protégée of the law, and the law would avenge her.

He began reading one of the completed chapters of his manuscript, trying to get into the mood to write.

A sound of running feet brought his eyes to the window again, and there was Joey, loping across the street.

Joey's eyes rolled from excitement when he came in. He made several efforts before he got his voice under control. He had forgotten something, he said, and now he remembered it.

He remembered now that the iron furnace shaker had been missing several days from its place in the corner of the garage.

Mr. Dixon looked at Joey in cold disfavor.

"The police may not like it, but you must tell them at once," he said sternly.

"Is they goin' to think I made it up, Mist' Dixon?"

"Possibly. You must be prepared to tell them just when it was you noticed that the thing had disappeared."

"I figger it was the day I cut the grass, Mist' Dixon. 'Bout Saturday. I goes in there for the mower an' I sees it ain't there in the corner no more."

"You shouldn't forget such things, Joey. You should have remembered it last night."

"Yassir, Mist' Dixon. I sho ought to have."

Mr. Dixon got up with a sigh and walked to the table and came back again, sank down in Freda's comfortable leather chair and shot a hopeless glance at Joey.

"Go at once to the sergeant's office and tell him about it," he said. "And don't tell anybody else. Don't tell anybody, not even your own mother if you should meet her. Nobody at all. Do you understand?"

"Don't tell nobody but the sergeant? Yassir, I sho understands."

"If the rod was missing since Saturday, you see what it means, don't you?"

"No, sir, I reckon I don't see nothin' now's I think of it, 'cept the perlice sho is watchin' me. Two of 'em over there now. 'Where is you goin'?' Mist' Peterson say. 'To Mist' Dixon's over in Miss Freda's house,' I says. 'Come right back now,' he says, 'or we'll put you in the calaboose.'"

"All right. If the rod was missing last Saturday, Joey, it means that whoever took it, planned at the time he took it to kill Miss Haddie with it. You see that, don't you?"

"Yassir, I read in the book Miss Elva gave me about 'meditated murder. Mist' Dixon, if I goes down there to the perlice now an' tells 'em, this may be the last time you'll ever see me, an' who's goin' to git yo meals? Maybe I oughtta climb up to Miss Freda's attick fer a day or so?"

"It won't hurt you to be arrested, so far as that goes," Mr. Dixon said with one of his sudden smiles. "For I'll get you out. May take me a day or two, but I'll get you out. Hurry through the back door now, around the other way, so Peterson, who is gazing over

here now, won't see you. Remember, if they put you in jail, don't make a fuss. Just tell them that Mr. Totem Dixon will be on their backs in two shakes of a rabbit if they do!"

Joey crept noiselessly out the back door and through the high privet hedge and went loping down by St. Stephen's church, beatifically happy.

Hot diggity dog, the great man was going to detect for him!

9

THE IMPROVISED STUDY upstairs looked over the street. It was Freda's upstairs sitting room and she had suggested that he use it as a workroom. Mr. Dixon liked the room. There was enough sound coming in from passing cars to keep it from being too quiet. It had the faint *sachet* perfume that hangs about a woman's room. There was a picture of Dunky over Freda's desk and one of Freda over Dunky's desk, and he liked to look at Freda's picture. Freda was twenty-seven. Her eyes were a soft butterfly brown and her hair was glossy and auburn. She had a lovable, vivacious, keenly intellectual face, and he blessed the day she came back to Oakwood for the summer course and said in her simple, honest way, "I've never forgotten you, Totem."

Mr. Dixon shoved Freda's desk to the front windows, put some books under its legs to raise it a few inches. It was preposterous not to write when you had come to a place for that very special purpose. Quite silly not to get the thing started at least.

As he tried to begin on the new chapter he found himself pausing and gazing out the window while he turned over in his mind the almost commonplace things connected with the crime that had been committed the evening before. So far it was like a thousand other murders, just a woman dead, with nobody particularly interested to know why, no clues, apparently . . .

He polished the apple he had brought upstairs with him and bit into it thoughtfully.

The problem was not how was it done, or how the murderer reached his victim, or what the weapon was, as so often was the case.

It was exactly as if Death had stood in the Pilsbury garden, whispering, "Come hither," and the victim, as if hypnotized, had gone to meet him. Apparently there had been no effort, on the murderer's part, to frame an innocent person, just a clean, plain murder, a "Here it is, take it, or leave it."

Still gazing through the window at the two houses across the street, Mr. Dixon saw Peterson detach himself from Miss Pilsbury's front step. Peterson crossed the street, shouted "Hallo!" through the screen door.

Mr. Dixon got up with an expression of contentment and went downstairs.

"I say, Professor, where's that Joey fellow?" Peterson demanded. "I told him he must come right back over there where I could keep an eye on him."

Mr. Dixon looked down at Peterson pleasantly.

"Joey told me he was going to the police station."

A scowl swallowed the friendliness that usually lay on Peterson's round pinkish face. "I'll betcha a cookie he's not at the station! This is awful!"

"How about telephoning to the station to see?" Mr. Dixon said helpfully, and unlatched the screen door. "The phone's in the library."

Peterson's side of the phone conversation indicated considerable heat at the other end of the line. "Aw, cut it out, Sergeant," he growled. "He's there, ain't he? Yeah, I'll explain later. Sure. Just checking. I always check, don't I?" "How about sitting on the porch a minute for a cigarette?" Mr. Dixon said cheerfully, when Peterson had hung up. "It's a nasty business, Peterson!"

"Yes, sir, turrible. The whole thing gives you the creeps, a nice lady like that. The sergeant's pretty keen, though. He'll break this in no time. I've a mind he's liable to make an arrest any minute."

"Are you one of the tramp-theory fellows?"

"Gawd, no," Peterson replied piously. "My candid opinion, Professor, is no tramp's mixed up in this one. You can't tell about the beads being on the drive. Granting they were there. It's like I say, she could 'a' been holding them in her hand, like women do. Or the clasp could have been loose and they fell off as she went down."

"Very interesting," murmured Mr. Dixon.

"Professor, why do you suppose that woman went out through the back garden, where it was dark and a storm coming and all them high bushes? When she could just as well have gone the front way, where the lights were? Somebody was out there waiting for her in them bushes and they couldn't have got her if she'd gone the front way!"

"Clever deduction," murmured Mr. Dixon.

"My candid opinion, sir, is it was her cousin. The two places over there are almost like one. I think her cousin saw that ash shaker in the other garage and copped it. Had it handy and waiting."

"I suppose you took a look at the corner where it stood in the garage?"

Peterson stood up.

"Sure, but let's go over and look again, Professor. And you can see for yourself how easy it was. Miss Pilsbury says the little end door of the garage was nearly always open. It's almost completely shut off from the house, too, by them high lilacs."

They crossed the street in a silence broken only by a faint twittering of birds in the maples and as they neared the far curb the screen door of the Pilsbury house was pushed open and a voice called softly, "*Mr. Peterson! Mr. Peterson!*"

It was Miss Pilsbury, saying to hurry, please, that somebody was in the garage.

The two men started running along the driveway, with Mr. Dixon, his long legs carrying him with the speed of an Indian fakir sailing through treetops, leaving Peterson far behind.

He arrived in time to see a golden-haired man stepping from the garage into the alley. It was the curator of the Gallery, Mr. Sylvester. He saw Mr. Dixon and came back.

"I'm trying to find Joey," he said. "He's not in his room. While I was at it, thought I'd take a look around the garage. Strange about that ash shaker. Very strange."

"Yes, strange," agreed Mr. Dixon, breathing a bit hard. "Miss Pilsbury heard someone in the garage and was frightened, so we came rushing." He gazed at the man speculatively. Sylvester was looking down the path, watching the approach of Peterson and Miss Pilsbury with bland disinterest.

"Sorry if I've caused any disturbance," he said casually, and with a nod that included all of them, went off down the alley.

Miss Pilsbury, her face grim and white, didn't speak until he was out of earshot.

"I heard something and looked out," she said, stammering a little. "I could see that a man was in there. I knew it wasn't Joey, or Dr. Young. And Mr. Williams is painting this morning. So I thought it was the tramp . . . come back. I'm sorry it's made me nervous."

"People are nosy and they'll butt in if they can," said Peterson. "We'll shut the doors, lock 'em too, if you'd feel better. Anyhow, we're right here. I was just bringing the professor over to show him where that furnace shaker stood."

Miss Pilsbury explained about the end door being left open until Joey went to bed. Joey occupied the coachman's old room above the garage, she said. The garage was for three cars, the space being rented to Dr. Young, the Moores and Mr. Williams. She had no car, she said, and Mrs. Douglas' car was kept at Sherman's for the present.

Peterson pointed to the corner under the narrow steps that led upstairs. "The thing stood right there, Professor. You can see how easy it was for the killer to slip in and get it, wait under that weigela bush, and bash her head in."

Miss Pilsbury put her hand over her face, and Peterson apologized hastily.

"I just forgot for a minute," he said.

"It's all right, Mr. Peterson," she said. "By the way, have either of you seen Joey? He promised to wash the pantry walls for me."

"Well, between us, Miss Pilsbury, he's probably being questioned," Peterson said. "He's a suspect, you know."

"Oh, no, not Joey!" Miss Pilsbury stood there shaking her head. "It couldn't be, you both know that. Gwendoline wasn't nice to him, it's true. But I—well, I'd never believe it. Never!"

Mr. Dixon's lips moved, but the only audible words that came were from Peterson.

"You never can tell, Miss Pilsbury," he said. "I guess Joey had some motive, all right. From what I hear she kept saying to him. What do you think about it, Professor?"

"There seems to be a dearth of motive at present," Mr. Dixon said,

with an air of caution. "It is not a pretty problem. The motive is there, of course. But deeply hidden, it seems to me."

"You are right, Professor," Miss Pilsbury said slowly. "I should say there's a reason for everything . . . That's what we mean by motive, isn't it?"

Mr. Dixon spent the time between one o'clock and two reading Malevinsky's *Science of Playwriting* which, somehow, rarely failed to put him in the proper mood to write. It was a book he always recommended to his writing students. All right, that's it, Mr. Dixon thought, it's motive . . . always . . . whether for a theme for a piece of fiction or for an act of murder . . . Instantly he was lost again, he tried in vain to steer his thoughts back to his new chapter. Motive for murder, he thought, was like a jewel in the grass, hidden until the light touched it. Then how its facets shone!

Downstairs the telephone was ringing. Maybe Joey, wanting help. He went downstairs.

"Yes, Dixon speaking," he said, lifting the receiver.

A sound like an audible swallow came over the wire.

"What about the child?" a gratingly husky voice said, followed instantly by the click of the receiver being cradled at the other end.

Mr. Dixon said "Hello" a few times, jiggled the transmitter a few times, sat down and got up a few times. "What child?" he murmured aloud. Had it been one of those wrong-number calls some people are always making? No. It was for him. It was an anonymous call . . . Freda's child?

Good Lord, this did not have anything to do with Dunky, did it? Good Lord, he said again, could it be Roberta, the golden-haired child of the Morrisons? What about Roberta? She was in Boston, too . . . Outside the day's heat was bearing down, the sun was never brighter, but Mr. Dixon suddenly felt a cold spot in the pit of his stomach. He found the card that had Freda's Boston telephone number on it.

The call went through almost immediately and there was Freda's pleasant voice saying, "Hello. Mrs. Nash speaking."

"Er—um—Mr. Dixon speaking, Freda," he said, coughing slightly. He always coughed somehow when he spoke to Freda.

"Oh, Professor, how nice of you to call me," Freda said with such obvious delight that Mr. Dixon blushed.

Freda asked him about the murder of Miss Haddie. There had

been an AP dispatch in the morning paper. "You won't have to get mixed up in it, will you, Totem?" she said. "I want you to have rest and quiet!"

When he could get around to it, Mr. Dixon got down to business.

"When you see little Roberta Morrison again tell her I've bought her a silver elephant," he said. "Brought Dunky some things, too, Freda. Stuck them in his desk."

"How nice, Professor," Freda said. "They will love it—Dunky's out in mother's garden playing, or I'd have him say 'hello' to you. Roberta had dinner with us last night. Sure you're comfortable?"

Somehow, Mr. Dixon had never felt quite so comfortable in his life as he did at that moment, listening to Freda's kind and tender voice. But when he cradled the phone and sat down, he felt the drag of that anonymous telephone call again.

"All right, Roberta is safe, if that is what the call meant," he muttered. "What now? What child? My God, *whose* child?"

He went into the kitchen, put down a saucer of cream for the kitten. It was a gesture of tenderness. He was not sure what it was that made him feel so tender.

Here, he thought, was a mystery of some sort, the kind that made your collar tight. What child, whose child? The voice was disguised. He did not know whether it was a man's voice or a woman's.

It was beginning to be increasingly clear that the crime was not a simple one. The execution had been simple, yes. But what lay behind the murder, the hate, passion, fear, whatever it was—the pattern of the motive—was undoubtedly intricate and involved.

"I'm afraid," he told himself mournfully, "that I'm behaving very stupidly. The solution of this crime is none of my damned business, the police, with a few noble exceptions, are very efficient people. Besides, I must remember what the Dean said . . ."

"Damn you, Dixon," the Dean had said privately. "Will you keep out of crime cases? Will you remember you are a member of the Oakwood faculty?"

"I'll get Malevinsky's book again," Mr. Dixon muttered and started for the stairs and his improvised study.

He had just bumped his head on the ceiling where the stairs turn when the telephone rang again. He turned back. This would be Joey this time, yelling for help.

"Professor Dixon?" the cool, impersonal voice of the operator said. "Boston calling, please."

Mr. Dixon felt the cold spot in his stomach again. But it was Freda.

"Professor, your voice didn't sound just right awhile ago," she said. "Are you sure you're all right, Totem?"

"Eh—um—yes, my dear, quite all right," Mr. Dixon coughed.

"Listen, darling, I don't want anybody over there to worry you. You promise me you won't let them worry you?"

"Yes, of course, Freda, I promise you. Eh—um, I hope you are well, Freda?"

Freda's delighted laughter tumbled over the wire.

"I couldn't be weller. Look, Totem, if you want to have privacy, so you can write, don't answer the doorbell when they want to ask you how to solve this awful thing. You just tell them you've got a book to write. But if you should want to work on it, darling, if you really want to show 'em what a master mind can do, you just tell old Calderwater to go to hell!"

"Calderwater" was the Dean. Mr. Dixon promised. He promised to lay Dean Calderwater out flat if necessary. He had such a vague and confused aura of well-being when he left the phone finally that he forgot to duck when he passed the chandelier.

"Yes, damn the Dean," Mr. Dixon murmured, peeping carefully out through Freda's immaculate curtains at the two houses across the street.

Still, there was the book. He must finish the book. He had promised his publishers. He might—eh—um—need the royalty by and by.

10

MR. DIXON RECOGNIZED now that all desire for peace and quiet had left him. He had lost his mood for writing.

He went back to his desk, however, and began reading Malevinsky's idea of "theme" again. "Impossible to write a play or a story

worth its salt without using basic human emotions," he muttered. "I've got to make the student see what it does to have each of his characters personify an emotion of some sort, jealousy, say—let him call it the character's main trait, if he wishes—but let him show once in each scene that main trait by what the character does, what he thinks, what he says, almost by what he eats, as Malevinsky points out, and let . . ."

There was a sound as of a car bumping into Freda's drive and peering out hopefully, Mr. Dixon saw Elva getting out of the car, clutching in one hand a neatly-tied baker's box.

He hurried downstairs eagerly.

"I knew Joey wouldn't be here to fix your lunch," Elva said. "So I brought some of those wonderful cheese and mint sandwiches of Wisner's—and some little lemon cakes. I'll make a salad and tea—and we can pour the hot stuff over some ice-cubes to cool."

"Splendid," said Mr. Dixon. "What about Joey?"

"He walked right into it!"

"Arrested?"

"Well, no formal charges. The exact phraseology is, I believe, they're holding him for 'questioning.'"

"Do they believe he's guilty?"

"I can't fathom O'Nara's complex thought. But Larry thinks it's a crime passionel. With Mr. Morrison as *it*. How about having our lunch on one of Freda's card tables by the front windows? Then we can see what goes on in the street."

Mr. Dixon put up the table, found a cover. He waited until they sat down to tell Elva about the anonymous phone call and his long-distance talk with Freda.

"Roberta is all right, so the question is, what child?" he said heavily. "Or, whose child?"

"I don't think so at all, Professor," Elva said. "I think it was a wrong number and the person merely hung up when he or she saw the mistake. People are so stupid!"

Mr. Dixon knew better, but he said nothing. He could see that something had attracted Elva's attention, and following her gaze to the Morrison house across the street he saw that Mrs. Morrison was seated on her sunporch.

"She's sewing on that embroidered bedspread she's been working on all spring," Elva said. "I ask you, Professor, would a woman

who'd killed another woman on her driveway less than twenty-four hours before sit on her sunporch and calmly sew on a bedspread?"

"Possibly. Could be a stroke of cunning. As to the 'calm' part, it's difficult at this distance to know about the emotions."

Freda's clock chimed two. Elva smiled up at him.

"Let's think of an excuse to go over. We can make it your call to Boston. How's this, 'Mrs. Morrison, I was talking to Freda this morning about the kitchen sink and I thought you'd like to know that Roberta is well and happy, she had dinner with Dunky last night?'"

"You get around, Elva," Mr. Dixon murmured. "All right. Not a bad idea . . ."

Traffic had doubled on the street, with cars slowing to let their occupants gaze at the two houses. Sunlight flooded the gardens now, and the scent of lilacs was everywhere. The sunporch, its screens glistening coppery in the sun, faced the upper part of the garden, toward the street. It was prettily furnished, and there were some bright bouquets of flowers in vases. For the curious passers-by not the least sign that only a few hours earlier violent death had passed that way.

There was a flicker of sharp interest in Mrs. Morrison's dark eyes when she greeted them, but it was gone instantly and her face became wooden. She was on guard and she never dropped her guard.

"It's nice to hear so directly from Roberta, to know she's well, and it's kind of you to stop by," she said, picking up her work again. "I hadn't heard for several days, as my mother writes only once a week. She has rheumatism in both hands, and you can see . . . I don't want to bore you, Mr. Dixon, but I think you've come to talk to me, haven't you?" she said with unexpected frankness. She took the morning newspaper from the reading stand and pointed with a quivering finger to its front page. "It's an outrage that the reporters should write things like that! I suppose you've read it? I can understand," she said with deep emotion, "the natural curiosity of people, but has the individual no rights? That the reporters are bound to respect? I did not love my cousin, it's true, but I did not kill her. And I'm just as positive that my husband did not kill her. Although I cannot prove it. This probably sounds melodramatic, I hope I don't bore you, but I'm one of these foolish women, Mr.

Dixon, who love without reason. A one-man woman. What I want to do, more than anything, is to find an alibi for my husband. He is innocent, I tell you. Innocent!"

"Why," Mr. Dixon said gently, "do you think it's any more necessary for your husband to have an alibi than it is for you to have one?"

"Oh, I understand the awful position I am in," she said petulantly. "I can't possibly do anything about myself. I am helpless. I was alone in the house at the time. But it would be wonderful to help my husband prove his innocence."

"Then you have no idea who it was that killed your cousin?"

She had her reply ready.

"I think Joey may have done it. I think he may have seen her at the window before. I think he's the most likely one. Unless you accept the tramp theory."

She looked up from her sewing and there was a hard, burning light in her eyes.

"Joey, or a tramp," she said.

Her glance fell and when she spoke again her voice was whispery and husky.

"I hope I have not bored you," she said. "Really, my ideas are of no importance, one way or the other. . . ."

Her tone, more than her words, was a dismissal. They got up, after a moment, and took their leave. Silently they walked on to the side street where, a few blocks away, St. Stephen's tall spire lay against the warm summer sky. Elva hurried along beside Mr. Dixon, taking three steps to his one, and neither spoke. They were both full of their own thoughts and kept their silence until they sank down on a bench in the green strip behind the church. Mr. Dixon was gazing at some tall larkspur that seemed to have burst suddenly into bloom, and against that flaunting blue his imagination was re-enacting the death scene of Gwendoline Haddie.

"Hey, come down to earth and give me a light, Professor," Elva said.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," he said in some confusion, and held a light for her.

"Professor, she's frightened to death!" Elva said, exhaling a puff of smoke slowly. "As you used to say in our class, what's the 'substance' of her fear?"

"Why, she believes her husband killed Gwendoline. Very bad!"

"Goodness," said Elva. Then she burst out with, "You can't stay out of this case, Professor! In the first place, you're entranced with a mystery, and either in spite of it, or because of it, you must find the solution. Otherwise, you are miserable."

Mr. Dixon made protesting noises, but they were not very strong.

"Look, I've just remembered something, Professor," Elva said.

Mr. Dixon grunted.

"I thought you'd get around to remembering after awhile," he said drily. "I understand one doesn't like to be a gossip. But murder is murder. In such a case one cannot be too civilized. So let's have it."

"Well, the house where the Morrisons lived before they bought their present house was on Mayview Street, where this thing I'm telling you about happened. It was an old house, too. The man who built it had an idea, it seems, that they would need rainwater. For laundry, you know. So he had a soft-water tank in the attic. And a little windmill affair rigged up to pump the water up from a cistern."

She looked up at Mr. Dixon, faint distaste on her face.

"On the day it happened, a neighbor's child was there playing with Roberta, who was about five then. The child, several years older than Roberta, ran up to the attic stairs to hide just as Mrs. Morrison tumbled over in the tank, head first, legs sticking up. The child ran screaming for the maid and she got Mrs. Morrison out. With the aid of neighbors, or the police, or somebody, they got the water pumped out of Mrs. Morrison. She said she tumbled in by accident. And personally I believe she did. Ridiculous to say she tried suicide because she was jealous. Especially jealous of her own child."

"So . . ." said Mr. Dixon. "It could very well have been an accident. Yes. But suppose it was jealousy? . . . Jealousy, my dear, is one of the strongest of the basic human emotions. Sadly enough, we are often jealous of the very ones we love most. . . . Still how does it tie up with Gwendoline's death? I don't quite get it . . ."

"We were talking about Mr. Morrison as a suspect, or his guilt, weren't we?" Elva said sharply. "If Mrs. Morrison thinks he's guilty, then she couldn't be guilty herself. *N'est-ce pas?*"

"Solomon's child! But the pattern is not clear, it's far from clear. When you have all the facts they will fall into scissor-like blades that

will cut a clear, sharp pattern for you . . . All right. Do you know anybody who, in any way, could profit by Gwendoline's death?"

"So far as I know, nobody would. I've heard it said that her income was very small. She had some sort of clerical job with the American Legation, in London."

"All right. About the Morrisons, now . . ."

"I don't—well, what about them, Professor?"

"There is something else, if we could only put our finger on it. Try to remember, Elva, what, beside the attempt at suicide, there is in the background. There's something else, a tie of some sort. We must find it."

"Between Miss Haddie and the Morrisons? Other than the cousinship, you mean?"

"Yes. Look back, my dear, try to remember . . ."

Elva made a sort of chuckling sound.

"Really, you dazzle me, Professor. Miss Haddie was away for more than ten years. First in Paris, then after the war started, in England. But before that, when she lived here with her aunt, she and Mr. Morrison were in love with each other."

Mr. Dixon reached up and breaking off a branch from the limb of the hawthorne tree above his head, began fanning himself vigorously.

"To think that my A-1 student could hold back such important detail makes one very warm," he said gently.

"I've not considered it important," Elva said stubbornly. "That happened years ago, was over years ago. And forgotten."

Mr. Dixon sighed, threw his fan down, dug into his pocket for his pipe.

"All right. Why did Gwendoline come back here?"

"Well, she said to get some things that belonged to her mother and her grandmother, things she wanted to keep as remembrances."

He waited a moment, puffing at his pipe. Across the street some children came out of a house and began chasing a yellow-haired collie. He watched the children a moment, listened to their laughter.

"Can't you see," he said at last, "that this old love affair puts a new light on the whole thing?"

Elva shrugged.

"Points to one of the Morrisons, you mean? I don't believe it, Professor. Why should Mrs. Morrison kill her cousin when she

knew Miss Haddie would leave the country permanently in a few weeks? And why should Mr. Morrison care enough about an old love affair that had been dead a dozen years to commit murder? Anyhow, as for him, he certainly wouldn't kill a woman he had once loved. No, I don't believe it."

"Does Larry know about the old love affair?"

"Well, of course. He must. It's as old as the hills. You've got to realize, Professor, that Mr. Morrison could have divorced his wife and married Miss Haddie—at the time, I mean—had he wished to."

"All right," he said after a moment. "Better tell Larry about our call on Mrs. Morrison. And our impression."

"You really do suspect Mr. Morrison, rather than Mrs. Morrison, don't you?" Elva ventured cautiously. "Of the two, I mean?"

"Not necessarily," Mr. Dixon said smoothly. "Have you a memorandum book in your bag?"

She nodded, produced the notebook and pencil.

"Make a list of questions as I dictate them," he said gravely.

She began writing obediently and when he had finished, she read the notes back to him.

1: Why did Gwendoline come back here before her marriage to the English captain when her aunt could have shipped her mother's and her grandmother's things?

a: Was it to see her old lover once more?

b: Did she succeed in seeing him? If so, when and where?

2: Why did Gwendoline peep through the Morrison window?

a: If she had tried to see Robert Morrison earlier and failed, why didn't she tap on the window screen the night he was in the living room (according to Mrs. Morrison's testimony to Sergeant O'Nara) and demand either to go into the house or to have him come out?

b: Did this really happen?

3: Did she at any time talk with Mrs. Morrison?

4: The slant of the blow indicated a tall person gave the death blow.

a: Is Mrs. Morrison tall enough to have accomplished the stroke?

b: If the killer was a man, why was there not force enough to have caused instant death?

c: Does this angle suggest a woman was the murderer?

5: Granting that a man struck the fatal blow, what was it that weakened its force, so that she was not instantly killed?

a: The sound of Joey's footsteps?

6: Who were Gwendoline's friends? And who were her enemies?

"Study the questions and write in your answers," Mr. Dixon said when she had finished reading. "It's a good method."

"Obviously," Elva said slowly, "you think one of the Morrisons is guilty?"

"Not necessarily. The rule is to find the facts before opinions are formed. Then, like a cow chewing its cud, to chew the facts and digest them, then form your opinions."

"Somehow, this case looks different from all other murders," Elva said dejectedly. "Little things, like bad feeling, but nothing big enough for murder. Nobody in this neighborhood would do a thing like this. Nobody . . ."

11

WHEN MR. DIXON AND ELVA had covered about two-thirds of the distance that lay between St. Stephen's and their block, Larry overtook them and listened with mild interest to an account of their call on Mrs. Morrison and such other matters as they had been discussing.

Larry's news for them was that the sergeant had made another search of Gwendoline Haddie's room and had found her letters from the English captain in the folds of a blanket on her closet shelf. A pathetic little will, which she had obviously written herself, but which was properly signed by two English witnesses, was also found. The will bequeathed her few worldly belongings to "my dear cousin, Roberta Morrison." And that, Larry said, was perfectly natural, as the child was her cousin and probably her only really young relative.

All the worldly goods Miss Haddie owned, other than her clothes,

apparently, were the few pieces of old furniture, the desk she used, her mother's old rocker, the harpsichord, the amber beads and some other bits of jewelry. And a few hundred dollars. He had an idea, Larry said, that the diamond ring would have to go back to the English captain.

"You're not putting anything over on Joey, I hope?" Mr. Dixon said mildly.

"Of course not, Professor. We're detaining Joey temporarily for purely psychological reasons. Gave him a good lunch and a pack or two of cigarettes. He told us we'd better treat him like a gentleman or you'd be on our backs."

Mr. Dixon suppressed a smile.

"I suppose you checked a bit on Sylvester?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. Peterson reported he'd been in the garage. We looked into his alibi. It's as tight as a drum."

They had reached Freda's house and Larry asked if he and Elva could sit on the porch for a moment.

"Do you know how tall Miss Haddie was, Professor?"

"No. I'd guess around five feet six or seven. Maybe seven."

"Right. Five feet seven. Official. Now, the head wound shows it was a downward stroke that did it. See what that means?"

"Clearly," he said. "It was either a tall person or somebody who stood on a box, say."

"Precisely. The murderer was several inches taller than Miss Haddie, I should think. Two inches, say, at the least."

"The Professor had already spoken of that, darling," Elva said.

"He'd see it, naturally," grumbled Larry. "But not O'Nara. He's as smart as a beaver in most things. But he won't see that Mrs. Morrison isn't tall enough to have made that downward stroke on Miss Haddie's head. He says she could have stood on a box."

"All right. Was there one handy?"

Larry grunted impatiently.

"There was one—a canned-milk box—by the kitchen steps, back of those white daisies that grow under the kitchen window. O'Nara says having seen Miss Haddie at the window once, Mrs. Morrison could have been prepared. Box in place, you know, weapon handy. Then when she'd delivered the blow, she could drop the weapon, slip over to the steps with the box, and disappear into the house."

"Quite possible," murmured Mr. Dixon.

"If we leave the Morrisons and the tramp, that takes us over to the Pilsbury house—nothing new has turned up there."

"Any prints on the weapon?"

"No. Wiped as clean as glass. Joey could have done that, too. We mustn't forget that. He's been studying a book on 'de-tecting,' you know."

"Joey is not without his gifts," Mr. Dixon said mildly.

Larry came back to Miss Pilsbury's house.

"There are the two women there—Mrs. Douglas and Miss Pilsbury—and the two men, Williams and Dr. Young."

"Eliminate the least likely first," Mr. Dixon said.

"Well, I'd say that was Dr. Young. He's a fine fellow, unquestionably. Besides Miss Haddie was not a patient of his, he scarcely knew her. Anyhow, if he had wanted to murder her I think he would have used some kind of poison. Don't you think so, Professor?"

"Unless he wanted us to think just what you are thinking," Mr. Dixon said. "Have to consider every angle . . ."

"Yeah," Larry said. "How about taking a look at Morrison's garage with me, Professor? Let's go over—I'll phone headquarters first."

"And I'll run see what I can do to help Miss Pilsbury," Elva said.

They stood on the driveway for a moment, looking at the weigela bush, and the south dining room windows of the Morrison house, which were about ten feet from the bush.

The inside of the garage was neat and well-ordered, everything was in its place. There were carefully-placed wall-hooks for tools; a hammer and an ax hung flat against the wall; there were several kinds of hoes, a spade and a shovel; and in one corner stood a lawnmower. It was a double garage and the spots on the floor where engine oil had dripped from the crank-case indicated that two cars were housed there, but only one car was there now, a small blue roadster.

"Plenty of weapons here," Mr. Dixon said softly.

"But why should a man convict himself by using a weapon from his own garage?" Larry said scornfully. "He'd prefer, naturally, to throw suspicion in another direction, wouldn't he? Now that we got rid of my sweet Elva, let's get back to the Pilsbury house. Elva

cannot bear for me to speak of either Miss Pilsbury or Mrs. Douglas as suspects. Nor even of Williams, for that matter. Where were we?"

"We had just eliminated Dr. Young," Mr. Dixon answered.

"Yes. Now there really seems no reason under heaven why we should suspect either of the two women, any more than we would have suspected Elva, had she been there. They didn't like Miss Haddie when she was here before, so they didn't like her now. But, lord, we don't kill people just because we don't like 'em. Half the town would be dead if we did!"

"Very true," Mr. Dixon murmured. "What about Williams?"

"Yes. I'm coming to Williams. I can't for the life of me find a motive for him. Still, he was there, he had access to the weapon, he used the garage and was obliged to see the weapon standing there in the corner."

Larry produced a folded piece of paper from one of his pockets and handed it to Mr. Dixon. It read:

Motive—Means—Opportunity.

1: Morrison. Motive: Jealousy. He felt his old love return and could not let another man have her. Quarreled, probably.

2: Joey. Motive: Greed. He wanted to rob her of her jewelry and lost his nerve.

3: Williams. Motive: Unknown. She may have learned something about his past and threatened to tell his fiancée.

"I think it was Morrison," Larry said when Mr. Dixon returned the paper to him. "He has a bad disposition. I don't like the man."

They started back to the street and when they reached the curb, Larry put the question he was probably holding purposely for the last.

"Professor, what do you think of all this stuff I've been spouting?"

"I haven't reached the point where I can say this two and that two make four," Mr. Dixon said quietly. "My opinion, for what it's worth, is that you should find out why Gwendoline came back here when she was about to be married to an Englishman. She did not come to see her aunt. She did not come to take her harpsichord out of storage. Consider that she came for a very definite reason. Probably, being a woman, it was for a sentimental reason. If you

can find the answer to that question, you might possibly know why she was killed. . . ."

Mr. Dixon was on the point of crossing to Freda's house when he saw Joey loping down the street toward him.

He heard Mrs. Morrison's voice calling out from the sunporch:

"Joey, I thought you were under arrest? Did you break away from them? Or did they let you go free?"

Joey came to a sudden stop, like a young colt, and balanced himself on his heels.

"Miz Morrison, there ain't no way to break outa jail," he said. "They let me go free."

"Oh . . ." said Mrs. Morrison. "Will they arrest somebody in your place, Joey?"

"Miz Morrison, I ain't the perlice. All I knows is I told 'em Mist' Dixon would be on their backs if they didn't let me out, and here I is."

Joey came on to where Mr. Dixon stood.

"That lady don't know nothin' yet," he said, lowering his voice. "She sho ain't goin' to like it, Mist' Dixon!"

"Like what?" Mr. Dixon said.

"They talk like they is goin' to arrest Mist' Morrison," Joey said. "She sho won't like it . . ."

The moonlight that night was thick. Mr. Dixon, kitten on his knee, sat upstairs in Freda's front room smoking his pipe in the dark while he looked out at the houses across the street. Tomorrow, Wednesday, the inquest would be held and the next day would be the funeral, so the report was. He thought for a moment, with a surge of pity, of Gwendoline sitting in Freda's porch swing as he came up on Monday . . .

His thoughts were suddenly brought up by the sight of a black sedan turning in sharply on the Morrison drive. The garage lights glared, the car slipped quietly in beside the blue roadster he had seen earlier, the driver locked the garage, came around to the front of the house, went in. Mr. Morrison, he reflected, was a man too prominent and too influential to be locked up by the police merely because he did not have an airtight alibi.

Mr. Dixon smoked quietly, watching the house with unashamed interest as lights appeared in the two upper rooms, watched the

lights fade, smiled pleasantly when the moon took over. He quoted Shelley to the sleeping kitten, *That orb'd maiden with white fire laden, whom mortals call the Moon . . .*

The orb'd maiden's light tonight had a strange white sharpness that made the scene look exactly like one of Gardner's water colors that hung in the Metropolitan.

It was a picture of stillness and peace. Only a pale light showed in Williams' upper front window, the other windows were dark. Williams' shades and curtains were drawn, so the light in his front window was dim. And all those puddles of shiny silver in the garden . . .

The deep-toned bell of Freda's grandfather clock in the lower hall struck eleven. Mr. Dixon settled himself comfortably, told himself he must get back to his writing tomorrow. A man should have several sources of income before he could ask a girl who was fourteen years his junior to marry him. His thoughts took a sudden, sharp nose-dive.

Something moved in the moon-splashed garden across the street. A shadowy something in the rear of the Pilsbury garden.

He tied the sash of his dark silk robe as he waited to see the movement a second time. When it came he dropped the sleeping kitten into a side pocket, ducked his head, and made for the stairs. He fairly leaped across the street and the driveway to the high lilac clumps, his soft leather slippers making no sound.

The shadowy form was at the further end of the row of bridal wreath. He could see now that the moving figure was a woman, but which woman, where she came from, he did not know. She was coming back toward him now, a tall woman, with a long shadow.

He moved back a step to the edge of the lilacs, slipped his kitten into the bushes, called softly, "Kitty, kitty, kitty?"

The woman came up boldly now, almost eagerly. He could see her clearly.

"It's Mr. Dixon," he said. "I'm looking for my kitten, Mrs. Douglas. He's around here somewhere."

"I thought you were a prowler and if it weren't for the wretched state of my nerves, I would have screamed," she said. "When I'm frightened, my horrid nerves keep me from making a sound. There's your kitten—under the bush there . . . Don't let it come near me! I can't bear an animal near me!"

He lifted the kitten, dropped it into his pocket.

"I thought I saw somebody moving along by those outer bushes a moment ago," he said quietly. "Did you see anyone?"

"It was probably I you saw," she said a little stiffly. "At times I have a slight phobia, the walls of a room seem to be closing in on me and when that happens, I walk outside until it passes. I went through the garden to the alley and back."

"My dear Mrs. Douglas, after what happened last night?" he said gently.

"Lightning never strikes twice in the same place, Mr. Dixon," she said almost fiercely. "Whoever killed Gwendoline will stay as far away from the alley tonight as possible. Good night."

"Good night, Mrs. Douglas," he said.

She went into the house through the kitchen door, snapped on the lights.

He heard Miss Pilsbury's voice, heard it faintly, coming from an inner room.

"Christabel, you're acting like a fool . . ."

12

THE INQUEST was at eleven. The coroner's name was Dr. Rudolph Samuels. He was a man who had never made much success as a practicing physician, being too impersonal and always in a hurry. It was said that he invariably left his patients with a feeling that they had imposed upon a busy man's time. He seemed now to regard the inquest over Gwendoline Haddie's body in the light of a mathematical formula and was prepared to get the thing done and over with as promptly as possible. Standing behind his table in an attitude that suggested he might run from the room at any moment, he made a few enlightening remarks to the jury.

A coroner's inquest, he told them, was a legal enquiry into the cause of the deceased's death. Witnesses were examined under oath. The jury could view the body, which was in the end room down

the hall, or not, as they pleased, it was not necessary in this case.

There was no question in this case as to the cause of death, but the cause had to be officially recorded. Hence, the inquest.

Joey was the first witness called. He told how he had crossed the alley from the Gallery to the Morrison garden and had seen Miss Haddie's amber beads on the cement driveway.

It was when he picked up the beads that he heard something moving in the bridal wreath bushes. He thought something was after him, and began running and never stopped until he reached Miss Freda's house across the street, where Mr. Dixon was staying. The coroner, for all his hurry, did not keep Joey from saying he never killed Miss Haddie. "No, sir," he said, "I didn't like Miss Haddie, she was always talking about red birds and blue birds being better than sparrows, it didn't make sense, but I'm a good Christian boy, birds or no birds . . ." *No laughing, please*, the coroner said.

When Mr. Dixon and Verne Williams were called, they both gave their corroborating evidence of following Joey and finding the body, each saying practically the same thing, that he was in his room when he heard Joey shouting for help and ran to the Morrison garden to see what had happened. Mr. Dixon explained that he had sent Joey to call Mr. Williams or Dr. Young and went to the wrong spot in the garden at first.

Dr. Young followed. They wanted his medical opinion. Had the deceased died instantly? No, he said, quite the contrary. He explained, in a coldly professional manner, that there had been many cases in the recent war of persons moving their position, sometimes several feet, after receiving critical injuries. The deceased was dead when he reached her. But the body was warm, and death had probably occurred but a moment before.

"I asked Williams for his flashlight," he said. "I saw then that she had received a severe blow on the head. A cursory examination showed that she was dead. I said we must call the police, that we must not touch or move the body until the police came."

"Who called the police, Dr. Young?"

"I did. Mr. Williams volunteered to stay with the body. I went to Miss Pilsbury's phone and called at once."

"Wait a minute," the coroner said when Dr. Young stepped down, although obviously he addressed his remark to no one in particular. "Where is Sergeant O'Nara?"

O'Nara came forward, took the stand, and informed the court of having been called by Dr. Young to the scene of action, that the deceased was there in the Morrison's garden under the edges of some bushes, as had been described, and the weapon had been found near by. He asked permission to speak of the beads that had been found on the driveway. They had made experiments which indicated that the beads could easily have slipped over the deceased's head in her struggle to move. There had been, O'Nara said, the usual examination of persons who were in the Pillsbury and Morrison houses at the time of deceased's death, transcripts of which were available to the court. He had only to add that a thorough search had been made of the deceased's room, which had failed to throw any light on the case. O'Nara then made way for the police surgeon, who corroborated most of O'Nara's testimony, in more technical terms, and stressed the fact that the deceased had not been instantly killed. Upon which the newspaper reporters began to scribble furiously, as if to say, "What does this mean?"

The coroner consulted his notes. He thumbed impatiently through a sheaf of papers. He read a page hastily, took his glasses off and let them fall on their thin gold chain. Then he recalled Dr. Young.

"I believe you spoke to the deceased at eight-thirty, Doctor Young?"

Dr. Young explained that he had gone upstairs after listening to a news broadcast at eight-fifteen and that she had spoken to him from her doorway.

"What did she say?"

"She asked me if I knew if Mr. Williams was upstairs in his studio? She said she had a date with him."

The coroner hastily consulted his notes again and had the clerk read that part of Verne Williams' testimony that told of Miss Haddie's broken promise to come to his studio that evening after dinner.

"Then the deceased spoke her last words to you, Dr. Young?"

"I would not know about that, sir," Dr. Young replied curtly.

The reply seemed to shock the coroner. He excused Dr. Young hastily, looked at his notes again. He glanced around the room, called for Mrs. Morrison. Upon which Mr. Gilray, a lawyer, came forward with a doctor's certificate, saying that Mrs. Morrison was too ill to appear.

"I represent Mrs. Morrison, the deceased's cousin," Mr. Gilray said. "As her attorney I wish to state for her that she has nothing to add to the testimony she gave in Sergeant O'Nara's interview."

The coroner twiddled his watch chain, whispered to a court attendant. The clerk began thumbing through the transcripts for O'Nara's interview with Mrs. Morrison. Meanwhile the coroner beckoned to Robert Morrison. He gave his testimony in a hard, tense voice. He told about going to the drugstore for cigarettes, then walking over to the park where the fiesta was being held. He was alone, and didn't see anybody he knew. On his way back, the storm broke and he took shelter in the vestibule of a laundry on Second Street. When he got home, Miss Haddie's body had already been found. Nervousness, or some other emotion, gave a rising inflection to the end of his sentences. It made a strange impression on the audience, for there was a quick sound of indrawn breaths.

Miss Pilsbury was called next. She told again of having been confined to her bed part of the day by an attack of gall bladder colic which Dr. Young could verify, as he was her physician.

"Briefly, Miss Pilsbury," the coroner said as he played a tune on his left shoulder with five long fingers, "we wish an official record of the state of mind of the deceased on the day of her death. It's extremely important for the jury to know if she seemed happy, or fearful and heavy-hearted in her general demeanor."

"She seemed very light-hearted, considering," said Miss Pilsbury.

"Considering? Will you explain to the jury what you mean by that, please?"

"People as a general rule didn't like Gwendoline Haddie," Miss Pilsbury said. "She couldn't help but know. But the fact didn't seem to bother her in the least. That's what I meant."

The coroner glanced feverishly at his notes.

"The jury would like to know if the deceased felt that her life was in danger, Miss Pilsbury. It's an important point. Do you believe such to have been the case?"

"How could she have been light-hearted and gay, if she felt her life was about to end?" Miss Pilsbury asked tartly.

"Silence!" said the coroner as a faint titter trickled up from the back of the room. "Have you any other evidence to offer, Miss Pilsbury?"

She had not, and he dismissed her with a chilled, "Thank you."

Glancing hopefully at his watch, he swept his papers together. He seemed on the point of beginning the summing up to the jury when a slight commotion occurred in the back of the room. He looked down the crowded room with a pained expression on his pinkish face. Obviously, here was something that might delay matters. He was right, decidedly. Mrs. Douglas came up the aisle toward him, her hat slightly awry, her black eyes flashing.

"Why haven't I been called as a witness, when I was in the house at the time?" she demanded. "I knew Gwendoline Haddie most of her life. You've always been in too much of a hurry, Rudolph. I wish to give testimony. I won't keep you long."

"Now, Mrs. Douglas," the coroner said soothingly, "Sergeant O'Nara talked to me about your testimony, I've read the transcript, the sergeant talked to me about all the witnesses. I'll have to remind you that we are interested in this hearing only in evidence with a very direct bearing on the case."

"I have something to tell, Rudolph, and I intend to tell it," Mrs. Douglas said.

"Very well," the coroner said, playing his finger exercises again. "Be sworn, please."

Mrs. Douglas was sworn. She went straight to the point. She was in the kitchen one night for a glass of milk to calm her nerves, she said, and while she was still there Gwendoline Haddie came in from the rear garden, thoroughly frightened.

"Please refer to the deceased as the deceased, Mrs. Douglas," said the coroner.

"She wasn't deceased then, she was as much alive as you are, Rudolph," Mrs. Douglas said icily.

Bang, bang, bang! "Do not laugh!" shouted the coroner. "I shall clear the courtroom . . . Order, please! Proceed, Mrs. Douglas."

Mrs. Douglas bit hard on her lower lip and raised her chin.

"She told me what frightened her. I will quote her words. She said, 'Sylvester, damn him, nearly frightened the wits out of me, Christabel.' I had known her always and we used our Christian names, although she could have stayed in England forever as far as I was concerned."

"Thank you; Mrs. Douglas," said the coroner and transferred his finger exercise to his desk. "I see Mr. Sylvester is present. This may not prove to be strictly germane to the investigation of the court,

but I shall ask Mr. Sylvester if he wishes to explain to the jury about that meeting with the deceased in the rear garden. The jury would like to know what happened to frighten the deceased."

Mr. Sylvester got up slowly. He was pale, either from rage or fright. In the hard glare of the north windows his bright golden hair seemed ready to burst into flame.

He gave the evidence in a hoarse but loud voice.

"I went out to the garbage can to deposit the remains of a lunch on the evening referred to," he said. "My wife was rehearsing in the church play at St. Stephen's that evening and brought me some sandwiches on her way down. I took the remains to the garbage can before I locked up, as we never leave a crumb of food in the Gallery in order not to encourage mice. As I stepped into the alley I saw Gwend—eh—the deceased. She said she had been frightened until she saw it was I. We were old friends, of years' standing, so she was relieved when she saw me. I told her I'd wait out there until she got back in her house. My cousin, Paul Anderson, came along—he uses the alley as a shortcut—and waited with me. He can corroborate this fact for me."

"Please, how long ago was this garden scene?" said the coroner.

"I should say about ten days ago."

"You did not mention it to Sergeant O'Nara, who has charge of this case?"

"No. I'm sorry, but I'd forgotten it completely. It made no particular impression upon me. Seeing people in the alley is nothing new. It's a clean alley, which is an oddity in this town. Pedestrians and cars cut through it frequently."

This seemed to be the moment the jury had been waiting for. They rubbed noses to whisper. Then the sad-faced foreman stood up.

"Yes, Mr. Joyce?" said the coroner coming to his feet.

"We have not viewed the body," said Mr. Joyce.

"You had your—I mean, I thought—view the body, please! Down the hall!" The coroner, mopping his brow, sank into his chair again.

The room was still as the jury filed back into their places. The coroner gathered his papers and began his summing up to the jury.

He briefly reviewed the autopsy findings. This set the cause of

death. The jury need not waste time in considering that angle of the case. It was established beyond all doubt that the deceased had died from the effects of a head wound. Therefore, they did not have to consider the usual questions of accidental death or suicide, which should simplify their work and enable them to bring in a quick verdict. Neither did they have to consider that part of the evidence which showed that the deceased had not been killed instantly. Nor the fact that the cold rain on the deceased's face may have been the means of prolonging her life for a few minutes. As to who committed the crime, the evidence was incomplete; except that the weapon had been found promptly and identified, as Sergeant O'Nara had explained. Did the evidence confuse them? If so, they had the privilege of asking questions. They were to consider that there were no marks of a struggle. It was definitely established that the deceased went into the rear garden frequently. It was also definitely established that she went into the garden in order to peep surreptitiously into the windows of the Morrison house. Why she did this no one knew. If the jury felt that the deceased was a marked person, that is, a person marked for murder by an enemy or enemies, as a result of these walks in the garden, it was incumbent upon them to say so, even though they did not know precisely why this was so. The important thing was to have the fact recorded in the coroner's court records. If the deceased had been light-hearted and gay, as one witness had testified, then her last days in life could not have been overshadowed by anxiety and her tragic death had been unthought of and unexpected on her part . . ."

The jury probably gained the coroner's undying gratitude by returning its verdict within ten minutes.

The verdict was that the deceased had died as the result of a blow, or several blows, on the head, inflicted by a person, or persons, unknown, that the weapon had been a discarded iron furnace shaker. The "spiritual and psychological causes of the crime"—quoted from the official record—"were unknown to the jury."

Around five o'clock that afternoon Elva Moore drove her car into Freda Nash's driveway in search of Mr. Dixon. She learned from Joey that Mr. Dixon had been writing earlier, was now taking his afternoon walk in the direction of the Thorndyke gar-

dens. Elva turned her car west, came upon him on the bridge over the garden.

She got out of her car below the bridge, walked up and stood beside him.

"Nice place," he said, looking down to where some white swans were drifting lazily on the yellow stream. "Your published story gave a good picture of it . . . But you were a little short on the five senses."

"Oh, was I, Professor? Which—and how?"

"Of the five senses, smell and sound are the most easily impressed upon your reader. Helps makes your story come alive. If there's a stream, make your reader smell it, make him smell the moist earth, the steaming heat, the wet grass, the wet leaves, the damp stone and rocks, the mold, make him hear the leaves whispering, the movement of the stream, the splash of the fountain—"

He broke off, looked down at her.

"I beg your pardon, Elva—forgot where I was. Did you want something?"

"You're a writing course, wherever you are, Professor, and I love it," she said, leaning against the rail thoughtfully. "Yes, I was looking for you. Joey told me you'd come this way. New developments!"

"Ah? . . . I thought there would be after that extraordinary inquest! Very extraordinary . . ."

"Professor, they've arrested Mr. Morrison."

"Yes? . . . On new evidence?"

She nodded, made a grimace.

"Between us, I still think O'Nara believes Mrs. Morrison the guilty one."

"Forcing her hand, perhaps?"

"Could be. Here is what happened. The cousin Mr. Sylvester referred to in his testimony has been out of town for a week—left the day after the church play last week. Well, he came back about two hours ago. And went straight to the police with his story."

"Yes? . . . And the story?"

"He said that the evening after the church play, which was the evening before he left town, he saw Mr. Morrison and Miss Had-die together inside the Morrison garden. He claims he heard Mr. Morrison say, in angry tones, 'Keep away from our windows,

Gwendoline, or . . . ' He says he didn't catch the last of the sentence."

"Bad, very bad," Mr. Dixon said, turning his round childish eyes to the sky. "Did the cousin make an affidavit to this effect?"

"Oh, yes. Professor, I think it was perfectly natural for Mr. Morrison to warn Miss Haddie to keep away from his windows. Don't you? Certainly she was annoying them."

"And Morrison did not reveal this incident to the police?"

"Unfortunately, no. Larry thinks he was watching out for her. And then when she came again, he killed her. I've never especially liked Mr. Morrison, Professor. But I don't believe he's the kind of man who could strike a woman over the head with an iron bar. Especially a woman he once loved."

"Events are beginning to come out of cover, like the lost pieces of a puzzle," Mr. Dixon said. "It is always so. At first, people are quiet, paralyzed either with fear, naïveté or sympathy. But after the inquest, and the funeral of the victim, softly-spoken tales are unfolded. Soon every piece of the evil design will be in its place, and the picture will be complete."

"Morrison's arrest will cause a sensation, Totem! Absolutely."

Mr. Dixon made no reply. He tapped his pipe out over the railing of the bridge and watched the air currents tear at the ashes. For a moment it seemed as if something tore at his heart, too—the memory of a golden girl; Gwendoline as she had been in his class at Oakwood.

13

MRS. WALTERS made the decision to have a church funeral.

She came by Freda's house late Wednesday afternoon to give Mr. Dixon a personal invitation to attend. She could not stop to sit down, she said, she was on her way to Charles' to order flowers for the church.

"Gwendoline was my own blood niece," she said, her eyes red

from weeping. "She seemed a problem as she grew up, Professor Totem, but oh, dear, underneath she might almost have been a saint, mightn't she, who knows in this wicked world? . . . I've asked Mr. St. John—isn't that a beautiful name for a clergyman, so like the blessed Evangelist?—and he agrees with me, the services are so comforting, and after all, she was a Haddie, and you could hardly tell her picture when she was twenty from my picture when I was twenty . . . I've especially asked Mr. St. John to have the bell tolled—after all, we're High, you know—and Gwendoline was baptized at St. Stephen's, and I'm so glad, for it says in the Book of Prayer that the Office is not to be used for any unbaptized adults or any who die excommunicate, or who have laid violent hands upon themselves—which she didn't—and she always went to Sunday school there, too, and to church on Easter, and no doubt, if we could only know, she would like to have the bell tolled. Mr. St. John told me, oh, dear, I'm sorry I didn't know it before, but he told me she gave him a tidy little gift for chapel flowers, so who knows how good she was in her heart? You will come, won't you, Professor—er—ah—Pole?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Walters," Mr. Dixon said weakly. "You are very kind."

"I telephoned Elva Moore, and she will accompany you—you've both been *so* considerate. Larry cannot come, for he must work on this terrible thing—which comforts me—but Elva will drive you, Professor. I must run on now. I want only pink and white flowers, for pink and white were her favorite colors although she wore blue a great deal . . ."

Mr. Dixon nodded sadly as Mrs. Walters went back to the car that waited at the curb.

"I loathe funerals . . ." he said to himself. "It might be a good idea . . ."

Elva telephoned after dinner.

"I'm afraid it'll be a bit gloomy for you, Professor," she said. "Still, Mr. St. John is not too long-winded. He'll do a lot of cutting."

"The hour is three, isn't it?" he asked. "Shall we go a little early?"

"Splendid. Two-thirty, say? Just in case there's a crowd?"

Promptly at that hour the next day they came into the church

and found the air full of the scent of white carnations and pink roses. Already the pews were full. They had to look around a bit before they found a bench against a side wall, near the door. Miss Pilsbury and Mrs. Douglas were in a middle pew, but there was no sign of Mrs. Morrison. A few rows behind Miss Pilsbury and Mrs. Douglas sat Verne Williams. And not ten feet from Mr. Dixon's and Elva's bench, in the last row, sat a man with bright golden hair.

Presently the bell was tolling, the organ played, and Mrs. Walters entered, accompanied by two or three young girls in somber clothes, probably some of Gwendoline's distant cousins.

"A colorful service," thought Mr. Dixon, who liked organ music and stained-glass windows and a bit of ritualism as well as anybody . . . *I am the Resurrection and the Life . . . whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die . . .* Mr. Dixon heard the chant of Mr. St. John, but half of his attention was focused upon the neatly-pointed golden sideburns of Mr. Sylvester. Why was his wife not with him? . . . Oh, yes, he suddenly remembered. Mrs. Sylvester was out of town. All right, fully ninety percent of the congregation were women. Why had this man felt impelled to come? . . . What attracted him? . . . He caught up with the chant for a moment. *In the morning it is green, and groweth up: but in the evening it is cut down, dried up, withered . . .* Dr. Young was not there, either . . . not for the dead, but for the living, was Dr. Young, and Joey was not there, naturally . . . But, yes, there was Joey. Standing with his back against the door, head bowed humbly . . . Mr. Morrison was in jail, Mrs. Morrison was ill, Dr. Young was with the sick . . . the others from the two houses were present, accounted for . . . They were far in the Lesson now, *The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law . . .* Mr. Dixon's attention wandered back again to the neatly-pointed golden sideburns . . . Why, he asked himself suddenly, am I questioning Sylvester's right to go to the funeral of a friend? It was one of his hunches plucking at his sleeve, of course. And it was really none of his business!

Later, he told Joey he would take dinner out. He wanted to walk off the scent of carnation and roses. He walked for awhile, then sat for an hour in the memorial park, overlooking the river.

He was full of gloom. All right. Granting the police were on the wrong track? That could only mean that Morrison was as innocent as Elva believed him to be.

It could be the gloom of Gwendoline's funeral, couldn't it? Or the sheer despondency of the scripture reading St. John had chanted.

Maybe, he thought, somebody was simply nutty, the guilty somebody. How did Morrison fit in with that idea? No, impossible to believe Morrison was nutty enough to bash in a woman's skull merely because she peeped through his window by candlelight! Not that simple.

He mopped his forehead. The necessity of finding the killer was pushing on him now with the force of a tide. "I can't escape it," he told himself. "And the Dean may think what he pleases."

A little before seven o'clock he wandered into Wisner's for dinner.

As usual, Wisner's was crowded. The excellence of the cuisine, and the downtown view of the river—which was really superb—brought customers in droves, especially in summer. Ina Smithson, one of the waitresses, had worked on the campus a year, and Ina took charge of him. Ina was young, plump and good-natured, and had a nimble wit. She could serve your food excellently and at the same time, with no apparent slowing of tempo, could give you excellent comment on everything under the sun.

On account of the pressure of full tables, she was serving Mr. Dixon's apple pie and coffee before she could do more than pass the time of day.

Now she got down to business.

"Have you heard the latest news about the Haddie murder, Professor?"

"Not if it's really new, Ina."

"It's so new it shines," Ina replied. "Mrs. Morrison, *not* Mr. Morrison, killed Miss Haddie, Professor. She confessed a little before six o'clock."

"You get around, Ina," Mr. Dixon murmured.

"Mr. Peterson was in here awhile ago, always comes to my table, same as you do. I save him the chicken wings. He told me."

"Very interesting," Mr. Dixon said, pushing back the apple pie with its blob of ice cream. He had lost his appetite for pie.

"She called a taxi, Professor, went down to the station and spilled the whole thing to Sergeant O'Nara. Mr. Peterson told me to keep it under my hat. But I knew you'd want to know."

"Good girl," said Mr. Dixon.

"She told 'em right out she'd been jealous of her cousin for years. Hated her because she used to run after her husband. Jealous, I'll say!"

"Jealousy is very bad," murmured Mr. Dixon, pushing his coffee back.

"She told O'Nara she hid behind that bush they mentioned in the newspaper and when her cousin passed, she let her have it. Mr. Peterson said the poor thing never knew what hit her. She passed the bush and bang! Wait a minute—I'll be right back!"

Instead of waiting, Mr. Dixon got up, paid his bill at the cashier's cage, went out slowly to the street and stood looking at the sky, his favorite pose when thinking.

It had been a perfect June day, so far as the weather went, and now a rosy afterglow sifted down over the town . . . If he went back home he would probably have callers. He was in no mood to talk, he must think quietly and at length, he must try to dissect this latest development, try to reach a decision as to Mrs. Morrison's innocence or guilt.

He was fed up with the conflicting opinions of Larry and O'Nara and their childish methods, and not only that, he was sick of the attitude of everybody connected with the case, disgusted with Gwendoline's old friends.

Almost at his elbow was the movie theatre, *Eldorada*. He could always think in a movie. He had untied the knots in the Eversham case, down in New Orleans, at a neighborhood movie. He bought a ticket, went in.

The lights were on in Freda's living room when he returned at nine-fifteen.

"Been waitin' for you to come home from the movie, Mist' Dixon," Joey said, getting up from the swing. "Sho is a warm night inside the house."

"How did you know I'd been to a movie?" Mr. Dixon asked mildly.

"Miss Elva told me. She heard about Miz Morrison sayin' she killed Miss Haddie, so she followed you on the street to the movie but she couldn't find you in the dark."

"Hmmm," said Mr. Dixon. "Was there anything special you wanted to see me about, Joey?"

"Yassir, Mist' Dixon. I ain't told you somethin' yet."

"All right. Let's have it."

"I got a clue, Mist' Dixon. I don't recollect it exactly, but I got a clue."

"How do you know it's a clue if you don't remember clearly?"

"I got part of it, Mist' Dixon. It'll come by an' by. I tol' you 'bout the ash shaker not bein' in the garage. Now, Miz Morrison say to the perlice she got the ash shaker out of the garage, when nobody was lookin', an' hid it in her kitchen, where it'd be handy for her to hit Miss Haddie over the head with next time Miss Haddie comes peepin' in her winder. Mist' Dixon, that shaker weren't in her kitchen."

"How do you know the shaker wasn't in her kitchen? Be careful now."

"I seen that shaker somewhere that wasn't her kitchen. That's my clue, Mist' Dixon. I recollects sayin', 'What're you doin' outa the garage where I got you for the scrap man when he comes along?' What I don't recollect is where it was I says all that to the shaker."

Mr. Dixon looked down at Joey with a queer expression in his eyes. Here was something. At last. He got his pipe and as he bunched the tobacco into the bowl and packed it his hand shook slightly.

"All right," he said. "Perhaps you saw the shaker in Mrs. Morrison's kitchen?"

"No, sir. I ain't been in her house since Roberta went to Boston. I dusted that day. But not since, Mist' Dixon. Cut her grass is all."

"Well, if you haven't spoken to anybody about this, don't. Keep it to yourself. Strictly."

"Yassir. The perlice let Mr. Morrison come home and he rushes right over here to see you. I was at the Gallery. He told Miss Elva he'd be back when you got home from the movie."

Mr. Dixon went into the living room and as he switched on the lights the doorbell jingled.

"Oh, damn," he said softly

Mr. Morrison stood in the hall, looking haggard and pale. Mr. Dixon felt his face grow red, for the sight of the man made him angry. Whatever the full truth might be, a fraction of that truth, at least, was that this man had fostered trouble between Gwendoline and her cousin, his wife.

"Morrison, from across the street, Mr. Dixon," he said awkwardly. "Have you heard what my wife has done?"

"Yes. Won't you sit down?"

He went into the dining room, poured a drink, brought it back.

"Better pull yourself together," he said coldly.

"Mr. Dixon, I need help," Morrison said. "I must have help. For my wife."

There was a moment's silence.

"I don't know in what way I can help you," Mr. Dixon said. "I'm not a lawyer. I'm not a detective. I'm just a teacher of English in a small college. And I'm on my vacation."

Mr. Morrison swallowed his drink almost in one gulp. "Mr. Dixon, my wife has confessed to a crime of which she is wholly innocent!"

"You mean you yourself are guilty of the crime?"

"No, certainly not," Morrison said bitterly. "I'm as innocent of the murder of Gwendoline Haddie as you are."

"How, then, do you know your wife is not guilty?"

"I know it because I know her. She's incapable of killing. You are obliged to know that the psychological fact of a person's ability or inability to kill must always be taken into account. I don't want her to suffer for this ridiculous and untrue confession!"

"You probably know the police will not accept her confession fully until they check every phase of it?"

"Mr. Dixon, everything she said seems to fit in with the known facts of the murder. They'll accept it. Gladly. If I were to make a false confession now even that would not help my wife. Those asses, O'Nara and Moore, would merely throw me in jail, too!"

"What you need, Mr. Morrison, is a good lawyer."

"I phoned Andrew Beavers, down in New York, and he says he will take my wife's case if we can convince him she's really innocent. He wants you to decide that for him."

"Oh, he does, does he?" Mr. Dixon said obstinately. "Andy Beavers knows as well as anybody that I'm on vacation. He also knows I'm writing a book. Or would be if people would let me alone."

"Beavers told me that," Morrison answered. "He asked me to remind you that all he wants is a line on the truth or untruth of my wife's confession."

"I understand. All right. Why has your wife confessed?"

"A mistaken sense of loyalty. She's a woman who feels things very deeply. Ten years ago I begged her for a divorce. She would not grant it. I long ago gave up trying to understand her."

"I see . . ." Mr. Dixon held his voice steady. "Ten years ago there was a scandal, wasn't there?"

"Well, all that was done and over with at that time. I had not seen or heard from Gwendoline since she went to live in England. I saw her just before she left Paris for London. I give you my word, not since then until she showed up here recently."

"Wait . . . I want a drink myself," Mr. Dixon said.

He went into the dining room, swallowed a jigger of whisky. He needed a bracer for a gleam of truth had suddenly shot through the obscurity. Mrs. Morrison weeping—Mrs. Morrison, head first in the attic tank—Gwendoline smiling from the Pillsbury windows into the Morrison garden where Roberta played—Gwendoline peeping in from the cover of darkness through the Morrison windows—her unexplained return from England—the anonymous telephone call, "What about the child?" All the pieces began to fall into their proper places . . . His revulsions for Morrison flared anew.

He strode back into the living room. "We might as well speak plainly," he said harshly. "You've asked me for help. Yet you've not been frank with me. Gwendoline, *not Mrs. Morrison*, was the mother of your child wasn't she?"

Morrison appeared to labor desperately to find his voice but for several seconds no sound came.

"How did you know?" he said at last. "We thought nobody in this country knew."

"Why shouldn't I know? This fact makes the case against your wife much, much stronger."

"Believe me, my wife did not kill Gwendoline. Look at it from this angle. Gwendoline would have left Plumhill and America shortly to live abroad, the rest of her life. At least that was her plan."

"All right. Consider revenge? . . ."

"No, no, impossible. Lena had known the truth about the child for years."

"But she didn't know who the mother was in the beginning? Or the father?"

"No . . . not at first." Morrison fumbled in his pocket for a

cigarette. "We were in France. I took her to Paris for that purpose, to adopt Roberta. I arranged it with the midwife who took care of Gwendoline."

"I'm damn well fed up with you and the whole case," Mr. Dixon said roughly. "Was Gwendoline a partner to all this?"

"Certainly she was. She was willing to abandon the child to the army of waifs in Paris. Which I couldn't permit. She signed the child away under the laws of France. Signed her away eagerly."

"And when your wife found out the truth, she tried to drown herself in the attic tank?"

"Yes, and thank God she failed! My wife's been a good mother to Roberta. She loves her dearly. I've tried to be a good father, too. Doubly good. And I love her dearly . . . My wife is not the murderer. But the murderer, Professor Dixon, is here in our block, mingling with us. Free!"

"All right. This kind of thing is the devil. Give me a day or so. I'll tell you and Andy Beavers definitely then. I'll do my best. There are a few questions I want to ask."

He suddenly got up and went to the kitchen, where the kitten was asleep on a pillow under the table. When he came back into the living room, holding the furry yellow ball high against his shoulder, Morrison's face relaxed in a smile.

Mr. Dixon surrendered to the warmth of the smile, too. "I'm afraid I've given you a nasty exhibition of the primitive man to-night," he said ruefully. "I used to be in love with Gwendoline, Mr. Morrison."

"I know, Professor. She told me . . ."

"I'd get up to give my class lecture and as soon as I'd spot her my blood pressure would rise," he said softly, as if loath to break the spell. "Gentlemen really do prefer blondes, I suppose. I knew she was shallow and vain, often insincere and untruthful, even; but she was golden to the eyes . . . Have another drink?"

"No, thanks a lot. I really must get along as soon as we've disposed of those questions."

Mr. Dixon brought his mind back to the business in hand.

"When you and your wife were in Paris that time, did you meet anybody from this place, any friends or neighbors?"

Morrison, leaning forward in his chair, was looking at him with eager intensity.

"Why, yes," he said, his voice heavy again. "I remember very well. We met Christabel Douglas and her party. Why?"

"A routine question. So Mrs. Douglas was there? Who was her party?"

"You see, it was this way. She carried on personally conducted tours in Europe. For five or ten years, maybe longer. Before her marriage, and after. My wife ran across her in a Paris shop one day."

"How long were you in France that time?"

"Eight or ten months."

"Time enough so that when you returned with an infant there'd be no question as to its parentage? You claimed it as your own, of course?"

"Yes, to both questions," said Morrison tautly.

"Did your wife meet Mrs. Douglas early in your stay, or late?"

"Oh, early, I think. We'd been there only . . ."

Morrison's voice trailed off, he stared hard at Mr. Dixon for a moment.

"I see what you mean," he said, nodding gravely. "Somebody in the party would know later—when she had time to think about it—that my wife showed no signs of pregnancy . . . But what bearing has it on all this?"

Mr. Dixon did not answer the question.

"Try to remember definitely," he said, "just who was in Mrs. Douglas' party."

"The party? . . . Give me a moment . . . Yes, I remember, for we had dinner with them at one of the swank hotels the very next day. There were only a few I knew. Patricia Pilsbury and her sister, Elida—the sister who died—and there was Brown, Sylvester's assistant at the Gallery—he'd taken Sylvester's place in the party at the last minute, I recall—and a few from Albany. There might have been one or two others from here, I'm not sure."

Mr. Dixon told him then of the anonymous telephone call.

"This explains the call," he said. "The person who guessed the truth is the person who telephoned me. It could have been Brown, for the voice was husky. Still, it sounds more like a woman's gesture. Mrs. Douglas or Miss Pilsbury, or some other woman you may have forgotten about at the moment."

"What can it mean?" asked Morrison, alarmed.

"Only that somebody not only knew that the child was not your wife's, but also guessed the identity of its mother . . ."

Morrison sat bolt upright and started at nothing.

"All right," said Mr. Dixon coldly. He had no intention of sympathizing with the man. "Give me complete details of any communications you may have had with Gwendoline. From the day she arrived . . . until the thing happened."

Morrison's face reddened but he nodded readily enough. He said that he'd had no intention of seeing Gwendoline at first. However, one day when he happened to be alone at his office, Gwendoline telephoned him and said she must see him. It was pouring rain at the time and she wanted him to pick her up and drive out a way on the creek road. At first, he said, he flatly refused. She threatened then to come to the office, said she was short of funds, and wanted to discuss certain matters. What could he do?

"I got five hundred dollars out of the bank, in bills, picked her up on the bridge, and drove out for a half hour or so," Morrison said absently, almost as if he had forgotten Mr. Dixon's presence. "She was still very attractive . . ."

"Yes," Mr. Dixon said. "What did she do with the money? It was not in her bank account, I think. I would have heard of it."

"She said she wouldn't put it in the bank. I didn't ask her not to. It was her own idea. She said somebody might let it out that she'd banked five hundred and that I'd withdrawn five hundred. And add it up. She said she would use the money for her return ticket—she intended to fly back—and would pay the freight on those things she was taking back with her. It's probably hidden in her room somewhere."

"Well, nobody's found it, apparently."

"There's something else, I think. Her diary. It wasn't found?"

"No, I think not. Sure there was one?"

"She always kept a diary. That day we were riding she laughed about it. Said she'd burned them all with the exception of the new one she started after she got here in the spring. She had hidden that in a safe spot in her room, she said. Chances are the money's with it."

"All right. We'll have to find it!"

"I'll go down and send a wire to Beavers," said Morrison.

"I CAN'T LET old Andy Beavers down," Mr. Dixon reflected as he watched Morrison drive away in his car.

It was Mr. Dixon's intention to sit down at his desk and figure the thing out mathematically, if he could, but a suggestion suddenly popped into his head. Why not go across to the Pillsbury house? He might run into something interesting, he could do his figuring later. He might even manufacture a chance to hunt for the hidden diary. The chiming of ten by Freda's grandfather clock decided him at once.

He felt in his pocket to check on his key, shut the door behind him.

Without a definite plan, he crossed the street, tried Miss Pillsbury's front door. It yielded and he went in and stood quietly near the drawing room door. A faint breathy sound, scarcely audible came from the direction of the dining room. He walked to the lower door. Miss Pillsbury was lying on the cushioned window-seat, handkerchief to her face, crying softly.

The beautiful chandelier was not burning but the floor lamp in the corner near the window flooded the room with a pale rosy light. Mr. Dixon went into the room, his round, innocent eyes full of anxiety.

"Goodness, Miss Pillsbury, this won't do," he said gently. "This won't do at all!"

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Dixon?" she said, sitting up quickly. "I heard you come in but thought it was Mr. Williams. He always stops a minute in the living room to look at the gold fish."

"You mustn't be sick," he said. "You're needed too badly. Can't I get you a drink, or something?"

"I'd like a drink, Professor, I think. Dr. Young's not here to see me. If you'll kindly . . . yes, over there in the sideboard, down at the left-hand side . . . I just couldn't help crying over that fool, Lena Morrison!"

"Oh, so you've heard? I came over to see Elva . . ."

"I don't think she's back. She went down to wait for Larry. Lena Morrison's not guilty, Mr. Dixon. She's a fool. Trying to save her husband! She's always been a fool."

Mr. Dixon found a bottle of peach brandy and some tiny gold-rimmed liqueur glasses, filled one for Miss Pilsbury, filled another for himself.

"If it were earlier, I'd like to talk to you about Mrs. Morrison," he said gently. "You may know that I teach fiction courses, on the side, so to speak, and these psychological cases are naturally very interesting to me."

"Sit down, Mr. Dixon," she said hospitably. "I'm all right. We'll talk now, if you wish."

She dabbed at her eyes, shook her head sadly.

"Anyway, I never go to sleep until midnight. Even when I go to bed early I read until twelve or after."

Mr. Dixon sat down, relaxed.

"It's deplorable," he said kindly. "Still, we've got to think of motives. As I'm always saying . . . Now, as to Mrs. Morrison . . . wasn't she desperately jealous of Gwendoline?"

"Bosh," Miss Pilsbury replied. "She probably was jealous at one time, but not now. Anyhow, people are full of motives of one kind or another. Aren't they?"

"Yes, I suppose . . . All right, let's agree that she is innocent, has confessed falsely. Do you think it could be Mr. Morrison? Just between us, of course."

"Certainly not. Why should he do a thing like that?"

"All right . . . Doesn't that mean, then, that the murderer is in *this* house?"

Miss Pilsbury's teary face blanched, a shiver passed visibly through her body.

"Mr. Dixon, you frighten me," she cried. "The people in this house are my friends. How could you say such a thing!"

She broke off, dabbed at her eyes again, looked up at Mr. Dixon.

"Oh, I see . . . You are speaking theoretically, aren't you? You mean somebody killed her. And if it isn't one person, then it's another? If not one of these two houses, it's the other? Or some other house? Eh?"

"Not exactly," he said gently. "No. I'm not speaking in those terms at all. On the contrary. I'm speaking of a particular person—unknown, of course—and a particular house. It could be this house. If it's not one of the Morrisons, then it *is* this house, isn't it?"

"Oh, you suspect Joey! . . . But I thought you and the police believed in his innocence?"

Mr. Dixon nodded, swallowed his brandy.

"I'm not the police, so my thoughts really matter very little one way or the other."

She gave a short laugh.

"From their attitude, I don't think they want you in this at all!"

"Probably not. I might even be a suspect myself, for all I know. They may spill the beans any minute. I drive into town in the afternoon, I take a house across the street, I am an old acquaintance of Gwendoline's, and immediately she's killed. You see how it is?"

Miss Pilsbury put her empty glass down on the window sill behind her. The brandy had brought some color into her cheeks again.

"Of course I see," she said readily. "We'd all thought of the possibility. We've thought of everything, I suppose."

"Naturally . . . Tell me, Miss Pilsbury, what is your opinion of the case?"

"I'm frightened, of course," she said quickly. "Still, I think it was a tramp. Elva and I are of one mind on that. He's probably far away by now, might have got down to New York and be half way across the country by now."

"All right. How would you figure the tramp angle, Miss Pilsbury? How could he have done it and got away, I mean?"

She thought quietly for a moment.

"It could be this way, couldn't it? Gwendoline slipped through the lower garden, say, a tramp was in the alley, probably looking for a place to sleep. Maybe he saw her go into the Morrison drive and watched from the weigela bush. He strikes her as she comes back, gets the beads, tries to jerk the diamond ring off her finger, then hears something—maybe footsteps somewhere or Joey putting out boxes at the Gallery door—becomes frightened, drops the beads, gives up the ring, and runs!"

Mr. Dixon nodded slowly.

"Yes, yes . . . All right. It's possible. Quite possible. Only—how did he get the weapon out of your garage where Joey had put it? Unless Joey was in it? That's a snag, isn't it?"

"Well, it *is* rather a snag," she acknowledged. "Still, how do we know it was in the garage? Joey is a good boy, but he's forgetful. Mightn't he have put it in the alley for the junk man? Or the tramp may even have been in the garage, found no safe place in there to

sleep—he might even have looked in Joey's upper room, you know—and then, took the thing out with him for possible defense.”

“Defense? . . .” said Mr. Dixon pensively. “Why defense?”

“Well, it was rather warm. Remember? He wanted to sleep out, say under the shrubs in the garden. Until morning. He might have been glad to have the thing by him.”

Mr. Dixon nodded thoughtfully.

“You’ve made a good case,” he said. “A very good case. Mysteries have always fascinated me. I—”

Mr. Dixon broke off at the sound of the sliding doors behind him being rolled back. He came to his feet, looked around.

Mrs. Douglas stood there. She was dressed in a blue Chinese robe, and wore blue boudoir slippers.

“I heard part of what you said, Patricia,” she announced evenly. “I know you defend Sylvester every chance you get. That man is a much more likely suspect than a tramp!”

“You’re prejudiced, Christabel. You shouldn’t talk that way. He should not have destroyed Athena, of course. But you shouldn’t suspect him without proof. If we all go around suspecting each other, what a mess!”

“Why are your eyes so red?” demanded Mrs. Douglas. “Have you been crying?”

“Mrs. Douglas, haven’t you heard the news?” Mr. Dixon said in a low voice.

“News? What news? What’s going on?”

Mr. Dixon gazed steadily at Mrs. Douglas.

“Your friend and neighbor, Mrs. Morrison, has confessed that she killed Gwendoline Haddie.”

Mrs. Douglas’ legs seemed to fold under her and she sank down heavily in a chair.

“Lena?” she gasped. “Oh, oh, this is terrible! I can’t believe it! I can’t!”

“Get her a drink, Professor, please,” said Miss Pilsbury calmly.

“Oh, God, in the wretched state of my nerves . . .” gasped Mrs. Douglas and reached a trembling hand for the glass of brandy.

“Where have you been, Christabel, that you hadn’t heard the news?”

“I was here at dinner, wasn’t I?” quavered Mrs. Douglas, between sips of brandy. “Nobody said a word then, did they?” She shivered,

gulped the rest of the brandy. "How am I expected to know a thing when nobody tells me?"

"Nobody knew it at dinner. Where have you been since dinner?"

"Well, if I have to be catechized, Patricia, I went upstairs and lay down, without putting a light on. I didn't sleep two hours last night, so I fell asleep from sheer exhaustion."

"No wonder you don't sleep," Miss Pilsbury grumbled. "The nearer bedtime comes, the more you try to excite yourself. If you don't stop prowling around outside at night . . . What were you after last night, anyway?"

"I've always known, Patricia, that you had no imagination, no real understanding. Last night I was timing to see how long it takes to go through the dark garden from the back door of the Gallery and back again. To the weigela bush, I mean. Forgive me for not explaining it at the time, Professor."

"Oh, you were?" said Miss Pilsbury tartly. "Couldn't you leave that to the police?"

"I was out there for my own satisfaction. I had to wait, of course, until that man closed the Gallery and went home. Mr. Dixon, you understand, don't you? If you'll excuse me, I'll go back upstairs. The wretched state of my nerves, you know. Goodnight . . ."

"Don't pay any attention to her, she's upset," Miss Pilsbury said in a half-whisper. "She's like a child, Mr. Dixon. Absolutely. The way she goes on about that Athena proves it!"

Mr. Dixon made his excuses, said goodnight.

When he reached the porch, he noticed someone was sitting on the bottom step.

"A thousand pardons, *mon cher* Professor, but my legs are folded," burred a voice. "Soused! Get the elevator, like a good fellow."

Mr. Dixon pondered the situation for a moment.

"Elevator's out of order," he said, reaching down for a firm hold on Williams' arm. "I'll go up with you. How'll that be?"

"*Ah, bon*," said Williams happily. "Always speak French when I'm soused. Know how to speak French?"

"Come on, in any language," said Mr. Dixon, and pulled Williams to his feet.

With the exception of a few ghastly whispers, Williams went quietly up the two flights of thickly-carpeted stairs.

"Go into your room and get ready for bed," Mr. Dixon said. "I'll wait and put your lights out for you."

There was a couch under the west windows and Williams immediately sank down on it, stretched out with a sigh of contentment.

"*Pardon . . . Un petit moment*," he said. "*Un petit moment . . .*"

"I'm afraid it's the couch for the night," Mr. Dixon said. "Better pull your shoes off."

He glanced around the room. On a drawing-board, against an easel, was a large sketch of Gwendoline's head, slightly idealized. Three other smaller sketches, in color, were pinned up. Obviously Williams had been trying to draw her face from memory. And with excellent results.

Suddenly Williams was sobbing.

"Don't think I'm mixed up in murder, do you, Professor?" he whimpered. "Be a good fellow and tell me."

"Relax and go to sleep," Mr. Dixon said, turning toward the door. "Good night. Out the lights go!"

He walked around the block before he crossed the street to Freda's house. Lights still burned in Miss Pilsbury's dining room, in Mrs. Douglas' upper window, and in Joey's room over the garage. Coming back down the block, on the other side, he could see that Sylvester's office lights were on, too. It was a warm, fragrant June night, full of peace and night sounds. Somewhere, as he walked along, a clock struck eleven. Then a dog barked, and further off was the sound of a train rushing over a viaduct. How mystically sounds hit you in the quiet of night, he thought . . . He must put that in his book . . .

He brought his mind back.

"Why," he thought, "is Sylvester's light still burning? Why is he working so late? . . ."

When he reached his bedroom and had undressed, he switched his own lights off and went into the front east room and looked out the window. He could not see Joey's room over the garage, nor Sylvester's office window. But the telephone pole in the alley back of the Gallery showed a soft glow in one spot. It meant that Sylvester's light still burned. In the Pilsbury house the light in Mrs. Douglas' room was out, and in the dining room windows were

now dark. He noticed then that a pale light burned in the northeast room. That was the sister's room, he remembered, and he could see no movement in the room. After a minute he went back into his bedroom, switched on his light to take a last look at Freda's picture before he went to sleep . . .

An hour later he began to mutter Zarathustra's recipe for sleep . . . "Peace with God and thy neighbor . . . and peace also with thy neighbor's devil, otherwise it will haunt thee in the night . . . Sleep, the unsummoned, the lord of the virtues . . . it tappeth my eye and it turned heavy . . . it toucheth my mouth and it remaineth open . . ."

On soft soles doth it come . . .

15

BY THE TIME Freda's clock chimed seven the next morning, Mr. Dixon had shaved and read the morning paper, *Time*, and *News-week*, and wasted a good fifteen minutes looking out the window for Joey. No wonder the damned idiot couldn't get there in time to prepare breakfast when he kept his light burning half the night!

Mr. Dixon went into the kitchen, grumbling, poached eggs while the coffee percolated, put two thin slices of bread in the electric toaster, brought out a jar of Freda's luscious apple jelly.

This was a new day, he reminded himself as he folded his long legs under the table, this was Friday, and by dinner that evening he must be prepared to call Andy Beavers by long distance and give his old friend an honest opinion as to the guilt or innocence of Mrs. Morrison.

To support his belief in Mrs. Morrison's innocence he had only one fact, granting that it was a fact. The slant and position of the head wound that caused Gwendoline's death called for more height than Mrs. Morrison had. Absolutely, he thought suddenly. No question. He discounted the idea of a box to stand on. Women were never adept at standing on boxes, chairs or ladders. They teetered too much. The movement of her arms would have been blocked,

the stroke weakened too much. But it would take more than mere theories to convince Andy Beavers over the phone . . .

All right, he would dismiss Mrs. Morrison entirely and get his enlightenment from the other suspects. Reaching for a pencil, he wrote their names, neatly, in a straight line, in the margin of his morning paper: Morrison. Miss Pilsbury. Dr. Young. Mrs. Douglas. Joey. Sylvester. And not one in the list looked sinister, he was obliged to confess. Still, a murderer's guilt was like a rope in the process of weaving, with a thread added each hour until at last it falls around his neck in a noose, for all to see.

He was brought up sharply by sounds from Kipps Street direction, sounds of ambulance and police sirens. The *Gallery*? . . . Unwinding his long legs, he hurried to the front door and saw some boys chasing along like excited geese.

He felt for his key, shut the door, and made the upper corner in a dozen or so strides.

"What's happened?" he said to a bareheaded man who leaned against the mail box.

The man shifted a toothpick, gestured toward the Gallery with a limp movement of the hand.

"Man's dead in there."

"Which man? You mean—the curator?"

"Yeah. Sylvester. I live in that house across the side street. Saw the lights burning in the office when I went to the bathroom around two. Must'a burned all night. Thought they'd forgot it. All the time he was lying in there dead."

Mr. Dixon shivered.

"Know how it happened?"

"A revolver was laying near his hand. But that don't mean nothing. Not any more."

"Oh . . . I see. You think he was murdered?"

"Sure I think he was murdered." The man spat over his toothpick into the gutter. "There ain't no respect for the law any more. You ain't safe in your bed any more."

"Any idea how long he's been dead?"

"Sure. I come out for my paper, got my vacation this week, I'm a truck gardner—ten acres beyond the creek, all paid for—and that Mr. Brown, who was the curator's assistant, comes running out of the Gallery yelling at the top of his voice at me and I runs over. Brown just come in, see, and taken his hat off in that little

hall closet back there. And seen him sitting there at his desk, dead as a sardine."

Mr. Dixon fumbled for his pipe, looked at it, then put it back in his pocket again.

"Wonder why he wasn't found last night?"

"Why, because his wife's off visiting somewhere and nobody's to home. That's the way with wives today. Look at 'em, couldn't wait even to hear whether their man got killed or not overseas. Had to run off and get married again. All women think of is cards and cocktails. If she'd been home, where she belonged, they'd found him last night. Say, you're that tall professor that's in the Nash house, ain't you?"

Heroically, Mr. Dixon smiled.

"Dixon's the name," he said in a fairly pleasant voice. "By the way, you haven't seen that colored boy, Joey, around, have you?"

"Sure. He was asleep up there in the garage and somebody runs up and gets him. That fellow Brown said Joey was in the Gallery with Sylvester when he left last night—quarter to nine, he said. Seems like a good enough boy, but I guess he'll have some tall explaining to do. Two murders, you know. Right here in the neighborhood. My wife's going to write a piece to the paper about it."

Mr. Dixon let that digest.

"Did you hear what Joey said about it?" he asked gently.

"Sure. Said he left Sylvester at his desk just as soon as Brown shut the door. About five to nine, he said. It was nine o'clock when my wife and me heard what we thought was a car backfiring. You can't ever tell about that any more. Too many kids, without licenses, driving. The more noise they make, the better. I said right away, 'That sounds like a shot, Dot,' and she said, 'No, it's back-firing.' Wrong, of course. That's what killed him."

Mr. Dixon went back to Freda's living room and sat down.

He began to tabulate what he suddenly called the "data" of the evening before. First there was the time element—his own—to be considered . . . after he left Wisner's he went into the movie, about seven-thirty, remained there for about an hour, or a little more, got home at nine-fifteen, Morrison came in about five minutes later. Joey left when Morrison came in. Morrison left about nine-fifty, or fifty-five, or a few minutes later, he remembered, Freda's

clock, which was two minutes fast, struck ten. He had gone across to the Pilsbury house then, where Miss Pilsbury lay sobbing on the cushioned windowseat in the dining room. And presently Mrs. Douglas had joined them.

He must get hold of some facts, of course. At once. The chances were the two murders were connected, although on the face of it the assumption that they were seemed ridiculous. If they were connected, it cleared Mrs. Morrison, for all her confession, and if he could build up his case from that basis for Andy Beavers, his work was done.

For possible references, he made this time list:

Sylvester killed——9 P.M.
Morrison is where at that time?
Miss Pilsbury is where at that time?
Mrs. Douglas?
Joey?
Dr. Young?
Williams?
And, maybe, assistant curator Brown?

The folded sheet of "data" went into his pocket. After he checked his key, he got his car, drove to headquarters. Peterson shook his head sadly, said something about somebody having a lot of guts to knock the curator off. Fine man, too.

"How about seeing the sergeant?" Mr. Dixon asked.

"He'd take my badge, Professor. I mean, he'd fix it so I'd lose it. Got strict orders to open the door to nobody. He mentioned you, Professor."

"Oh, he did, did he?"

"Well, you know how it is, Professor. I'd rather let you in than anybody."

Mr. Dixon said he knew exactly how it was. Grim business, this murder was. If Sergeant O'Nara understood, he would surely make an exception in his case. He handed Peterson his card on which he had written boldly, "Forgive me for intruding, Sergeant, but must see you. Very urgent."

"I'll take it right in, Professor," Peterson said, reading the card and being duly impressed. "Sit down, Professor."

Mr. Dixon had no more than sat down than he got up again.

The card and its message had produced an instant and gratifying response, for Peterson had thrown wide O'Nara's very private door. Never had Mr. Dixon looked more innocent, and his round eyes more childlike and artless, than at the moment when he stepped into O'Nara's office.

Hooper, O'Nara's secretary, was there, Larry was standing with his back to the window, and Joey sat dejectedly in a corner chair. Joey's face lit up like a street lamp. "Hot diggity dog," Joey said fervently.

"Good morning, Professor," Sergeant O'Nara said in a voice that had the brittle edge of glass. "I suppose you think we're bullying Joey?"

"Certainly not, Sergeant," Mr. Dixon said innocently. "Good morning, Joey. Good morning, Larry. I did wonder, though, Sergeant, why Joey didn't show up to prepare my breakfast."

"Yassir," said Joey. "I sho was sorry, Mist' Dixon."

"You—er—um—don't think Joey's connected with the unfortunate Gallery affair, do you, Sergeant?" Mr. Dixon asked in a gently incredulous tone.

O'Nara gazed at Mr. Dixon in ill-concealed astonishment.

"Oh, certainly not," he said. And laughed shortly. "Why should we? It just happens that Joey was the last person to see Sylvester alive. He was there, by his own admission, within five minutes of the time several neighbors heard two shots. Now, don't ask me why the neighbors didn't notify the police when they heard the shots. The dumbbells can't tell shots from backfiring. But let's get down to brass tacks, Professor. You wanted to see me. Privately?"

"Yes, but it can wait until you have finished with Joey, Sergeant," Mr. Dixon said artlessly. "I'd like to hear first about Joey anyway."

"Well, okay," O'Nara said grudgingly. "No harm, I suppose. Look, Professor, what we look for first is the motive. You understand, of course, that's first?"

Larry Moore turned around and faced the window and sucked his cheeks in.

"Yes, I understand, Sergeant," Mr. Dixon said quietly.

"Well, we're talking to Joey along that line," the sergeant said. "We don't think Joey killed Sylvester—did you kill him, Joey?" he yelled quickly.

Joey almost jumped out of his chair.

"No, sir, Sergeant," he wailed. "I tole you I is a Christian."

"Here's a point that may interest you, Professor," cooed O'Nara in sugary tones. "Joey says he was at your house when the shots were heard. Says he heard 'em, too, and thought it was backfire. Maybe you heard 'em, too, Professor?"

"Wait, you're getting me puzzled, Sergeant," Mr. Dixon said, and drew his long legs in and hooked them around the sides of his chair. "You spoke of motive being first—"

"We'll get back to that," rapped O'Nara. "Now, was Joey at your house? And did you hear the shots?"

"You see, it was this way, Sergeant," Mr. Dixon said plaintively. "I was at a movie. I got home at about quarter after nine. And Joey was on the porch, swinging."

"Oh, so Joey was swinging, was he? Well, he'd had plenty of time to get there!"

"Of course I didn't hear the shots, Sergeant," Mr. Dixon said gently.

"Look, Professor. You're supposed to know something about these things, I'm told. As I just said, we look for motive first, then means and opportunity—"

Sergeant O'Nara interrupted himself, ran a limp handkerchief over his perspiring brow.

"God damn it, Moore," he cried, "what are you looking at out that window?"

Larry turned around quickly, let his cheeks out, swallowed hard.

"Sorry, Sergeant," he said. "I was listening. Intently."

"Now, Professor," said O'Nara somewhat mollified. "Now, you know that withholding information is contrary to law. So I don't have to remind you that if you know anything that would incriminate Joey, or anybody else, you are obliged by law to give us that information. Now, do you know of any reason—motive, Professor—why Joey would kill Sylvester?"

Mr. Dixon shook his head vigorously.

"I can't imagine any reason," he said. "Certainly I never heard him say one word against Mr. Sylvester at any time. If Sylvester was killed at nine, this wouldn't be significant, I suppose. But I was wondering why Joey's light burned all night?"

"So, your light burned all night?" the sergeant barked in Joey's direction. "Will you tell us why?"

"Yassir, Mist' Sergeant," Joey said sullenly. "I'm scairt, that's why."

"You were talking about motive, means and opportunity, Sergeant," Mr. Dixon said.

"Well, Joey had the opportunity and the means, Professor. He was on the spot. And Sylvester was killed with one of the museum guns."

"Really?" Mr. Dixon looked over at the sergeant with an inscrutable expression in his round eyes. "You don't think it was suicide?"

"No, Professor," O'Nara said indulgently. "Our homicide department makes it a business of being able to tell the difference between suicide and murder. This was murder. Moore, what in the devil is the matter with your face?"

"Nothing, Sergeant," said Larry, letting his cheeks out again. "Be a good sport, Sergeant, and tell the Professor how you figure it."

For a moment Sergeant O'Nara looked completely puzzled.

"Go home, Joey," he said. "But stick around—we may want you again."

"Yassir, Sergeant," Joey said, leaping for the door.

"Now, it was this way, Professor," O'Nara said. "If Sylvester had wanted to commit suicide he would have used the revolver that he kept in the desk drawer, and for which he had a permit. That's reasonable, isn't it?"

"Yes. Very reasonable, Sergeant."

"Well, the gun used was an old thing out of one of the cases in room 14. There's a drawer in the same case with a lot of bullets, cartridges and loose shot. Somebody got the gun out of the case, loaded it, and that's that."

"The gun was wiped clean, Professor," Larry said. "Whoever shot him took time to wipe it carefully before tossing it down on the floor beside Sylvester's chair."

"Then there was no note, or anything of that nature, I suppose?" Mr. Dixon said.

"Nothing, Professor," O'Nara said. "It's a plain case of murder."

The door opened to admit Peterson's face.

"Mr. Morrison's come to see his wife," he said in a stage whisper.

"Fine," said O'Nara. "Moore, go out and keep watch on him. And when he starts to leave, bring him in."

When the door closed behind Larry, Sergeant O'Nara turned to Mr. Dixon.

"Now, Professor, what did you want to see me about?"

"I see part of it was foolish, that about Joey's light burning," Mr. Dixon said with an attitude of confessing a sin. "On Tuesday, I think it was, I got what I think was an anonymous telephone call, although it could have been merely a wrong number. Afterwards, I couldn't be certain whether it was a man's voice or a woman's, but probably a woman's. Husky, you know. Anyhow, when I answered, the voice said, 'What about the child?' and hung up. I've thought a great deal about it and—"

"Look," O'Nara said interrupting with scant patience, "you can't pay any attention to a thing like that. Sometimes we get something that's good, I'll admit. But more often these anonymous messages simply stink. And that's all. We've got one almost every day this week on the Haddie case. One came in about you, too."

"Indeed?" Mr. Dixon was genuinely surprised. "What did it say?"

"Oh, it reminded us that you were an old friend; you came into town that day and she was killed that night. Wait!"

O'Nara reached into a drawer, thumbed over some letters, threw one across the desk toward Mr. Dixon.

"Keep it for a souvenir. No finger prints on it. People are too damned smart these days."

The door opened and Larry and Morrison came in. Morrison glanced at Mr. Dixon, bowed slightly.

"The doctor thinks Mr. Morrison better not stay," Larry said apologetically. "And Mr. Morrison is in a hurry."

The sergeant made it a point, apparently, to be unusually pleasant to his guest.

"Sit down, Mr. Morrison," he said courteously. "Just a few questions about the Sylvester affair. We've decided to ask all the neighbors where they were at nine o'clock last night."

"At nine? . . ." Morrison pondered for a moment. "Yes. I'd left my car—in the morning—at Dennison's to be washed and have the batteries checked. I went in there to get it at five to nine. A minute or two before I drove the car out St. Stephen's clock struck nine. You can check that with Charlie Dennison or that hired hand in there called Speed."

"Thanks," said O'Nara. "Thanks very much, Mr. Morrison."

Morrison turned slowly around and, without speaking further, walked out of the room. At a nod from the sergeant, Larry followed him.

"Thank you, Sergeant," said Mr. Dixon as if their conversation had not been interrupted. "As I said, I kept thinking about the telephone call and all of a sudden last evening something popped into my head. That's what I came to tell you about, Sergeant."

It would have been difficult to separate the patchwork of emotions that lay stretched across O'Nara's face.

"It popped into my head, Sergeant," Mr. Dixon went on before O'Nara could find his voice, "that maybe the Morrison's little girl is—or was—Miss Haddie's."

O'Nara went over to the sink in the corner of the room, dashed cold water on his face and head, patted himself dry with a towel.

"Look, Professor," he said wearily when he came back to his desk. "As man to man, don't you think the police have done enough to the Morrisons? Let's keep our direction, shall we? We'll prosecute Mrs. Morrison for murder. But let's don't take her child away just because something pops into your head. Maybe it's a coincidence, but I've been going by their house for the past three years and I know how much that woman loves her child. Was that all that popped into your head, Professor?"

It was all, Mr. Dixon said. And made a hasty exit. He went over to where he had parked his car. The expression on his face as he drove away was like that of the cat that had swallowed not only the canary, but the fattest canary of the lot.

16

THE POLICE HAD DETOURED the traffic two blocks each way from the Gallery. The lazy warmth of the sun and the twittering of birds in the maples seemed out of tune, for the people of the neighborhood were stunned and frightened. Two murders in half a week! Vague peril seemed to be threatening each and all. Terrified eyes

gazed from white faces and when dusk came, doors were shut and locked. Lights were burned all night. Even now, in the golden warmth of the June morning, the children were watched. They must not go beyond their own gardens. They must keep out of alleys and garages.

Elva remained at home, waiting until O'Nara came. Larry and Hooper were to question the neighbors—the ones on Kipps Street—and record their statements. She was to help O'Nara.

When the sergeant came the questions were the same as always: Where were you, and you, and you—at nine o'clock the night before? And have you proof? None, it seemed, had airtight alibis.

Miss Pilsbury said she had been in the dining room all evening. She was pale and red-eyed, as if she had not slept during the night. Mrs. Douglas seemed terrified, her sallow skin had tightened about her high cheekbones until she looked like a death's-head. She stammered through a statement that she had fallen asleep after dinner and slept until near ten o'clock.

"You don't have to answer my questions, Mrs. Douglas. You may call your lawyer first if you wish, it's your legal right," O'Nara said. "I must put my questions, though, and I'd be glad to have frank answers. Are you ready to confess that you killed Curator Sylvester?"

"You utter fool, you ass," Mrs. Douglas said, but she was shivering so violently that her teeth made sharp clacking noises. "I didn't kill Mr. Sylvester and you know it!"

"Everybody knows you hated Sylvester," O'Nara said calmly. "As I understand it, this Athena of yours is a statuette which you gave to the Gallery. This was last October, wasn't it?"

"The twentieth of last October. He put it in the basement temporarily, he said. When it hadn't been placed after seven months, I became suspicious. I went down in the basement one day while he was away and made a search. Athena wasn't there. When I accused him of destroying it, he wouldn't deny it. I was angry, but not angry enough to kill him. I wouldn't harm anybody. It—it's my nerves, Sergeant."

Miss Pilsbury spoke then.

"Now, look, Sergeant," she said. "We know you have to ask questions. But Christabel is sick and she's telling you the truth when

she says she got up from the table last night and went to her room. I can testify to that."

"And came down to the dining room while you were entertaining the professor, at a little after ten?" he said politely. "Do you positively know, Miss Pilsbury, that she was in her room at nine o'clock? Could you swear to that in a court of law?"

"No. For I wasn't upstairs with her. But I have every reason to believe she was in her room. Anyhow, you can't bully her, Sergeant, and you know it!"

"I don't intend to bully her. Mrs. Douglas, would it interest you to know that some schoolboys stole your Athena as a Halloween prank last October and left it on the Thorndyke High School lawn? Where the janitor found it and put it in the school basement? And forgot about it. The police have found it finally. Sylvester should have told you the truth, of course. Still, you have accused this man falsely—"

Sergeant O'Nara stopped short. Mrs. Douglas had slumped down in her chair in a dead faint.

"Now look what you have done to an innocent woman!" cried Miss Pilsbury.

"I don't believe innocent women faint quite that easy," O'Nara said tartly. "Get her some water, Elva—she'll be all right!"

They were on the second floor, in Mrs. Douglas' room. The sergeant strode out into the hall and yelled, "Where's that painter, Williams?"

Immediately a rusty squeak came down the well of the upper stairs. It was Williams, awake at last, trying to ask who wanted him, and why.

O'Nara tilted his head and shouted, "I'm bringing Mrs. Moore to get a statement from you. I'm in a hurry, too, in case you wouldn't know."

They found Williams looking ghastly and greenish, still partially dressed from the evening before. His shoes lay on the floor by the end of the studio couch, and a pair of Chinese straw slippers covered his bare feet.

"A thousand pardons," he said in an anguished voice, "but who's had the cup of hemlock now?"

"Where were you at nine o'clock last night, Mr. Williams?" asked O'Nara pleasantly.

"Nine o'clock? Last night? Dying, I think . . . Sergeant, won't you please go away, like a good fellow, until I can get a bath and some breakfast?"

"Stewed last night, I take it, Mr. Williams?"

"My God, and how," groaned Williams. "Went to the funeral, Sergeant. Never go to funerals. Thought about the poor English captain, though. Poor fellow, ghastly, you know. Thought I'd go in his place. Going to write him a letter. Thought he'd like to know. All that scripture reading and the smelly flowers got my goat, Sergeant. Devilish depressing!"

"And you got drunk? I see. But all I'm interested in, Mr. Williams, is where were you at nine o'clock last night?"

"Look, Sergeant, my stomach feels like the bounding main, so how can I answer questions about where I was at any minute? I tell you, I feel like I'm dying. So tell me, like a good fellow, who's been popped off. Ought to know before I'm deceased myself, oughtn't I?"

"Mr. Sylvester, curator of the Gallery," said O'Nara coldly. "Did you, by any chance, kill him, Mr. Williams? Is that why you got stewed?"

"Oh, my God, Sylvester!" Williams groaned, sank a little deeper into the springs of the couch. "God, I never saw such golden hair as his! When the light fell through that amber window at church, his head blazed like a conflagration! Be a good fellow, Sergeant, and tell me where it happened?"

"In the Gallery office. At nine o'clock, as near as we can figure it. And what I want to know, and am going to know, Mr. Williams, is where were you at nine o'clock?"

Williams rubbed his hand across his eyes.

"Sylvester?" he said. "Sure it was Sylvester? God, I remember now . . . I went over to the Gallery. I was unable to eat dinner . . . Funeral, you know. Always takes my appetite. Somebody told me the Gallery had a painting by Hussick. Second-rate fellow. They said his painting had a woman sitting by a piano. I went over to see it. Was afraid the pose might knock mine out. But it's a block of wood, if I ever saw one, Sergeant. Not a corpuscle in it! Perfectly foul!"

"Mr. Williams," said O'Nara in a deadly quiet voice, "did you happen to see Sylvester while you were at the Gallery?"

"Yes, I saw him, Sergeant. While I was looking at that Hussick thing—God, it's awful—Sylvester came to the door for something and spoke to me. I went back to his office with him and we had a cigarette. He was at the funeral, too, you know. I told him about the portrait I'd planned to paint of Miss Haddie—my 'Lady of the Harpsichord,' you know—and when I told him I'd been trying all day to sketch her face from memory—and the day before, too—he reached into a drawer and gave me her photograph. Said it was about twelve years old. It won't help me any, of course, but I had to be polite and take it."

"Then what did you do, Mr. Williams?" O'Nara asked pleasantly.

"I phoned for a taxi, used Sylvester's telephone—on the desk—and when it came, I went down to the Piccadilly Bar. Sylvester almost went with me. Said he had a notion to, a good notion, but he'd get drunk if he did, and he hadn't been married long. My God, if he'd only come! So, I went and got drunk. Always, after a funeral, you know."

"What time did you leave?"

"The Gallery? Oh, about seven-thirty, or eight, I imagine. Seven-thirty, maybe. I think I went somewhere else from the Piccadilly, I'm not sure. I'll remember when I've had a bath and some breakfast."

"Just a moment, Mr. Williams. Put your mind on it and I think you can tell me exactly where you were at nine o'clock. Did you come back to the Gallery?"

Williams rubbed his eyes, looked up hopefully.

"Where's the Professor?" he asked. "He was with me . . . No! Got it wrong. I came home in a cab, I remember, and my legs folded. I was sitting on the steps, waiting for succor, and . . ."

"And what?" urged O'Nara gently.

"Why, the Professor came. God, I think I asked him to ring for the elevator. Perfectly foul . . . The Professor helped me up the stairs, got me in here to the couch. A thousand pardons, Mrs. Moore, very sorry to talk such twaddle before you."

"Just a minute, Mr. Williams," said O'Nara. "Where did Professor Dixon come from? Up the steps in front of you?"

"No. Out of the door behind me. As if he'd been in the living room."

"You remember some things very clearly," O'Nara said with a tinge of sarcasm.

He stood up, thrust his memorandum book into his pocket.

"Well, okay, Mr. Williams. Get your bath and some breakfast. And drink a lot of strong coffee, for you're going to have to do a lot of remembering!"

"I'll ask Aggie to have your breakfast ready in ten minutes," Elva said sympathetically. "And the coffee is good and strong."

It took Elva but a few minutes to type the notes and give them to Peterson, who waited downstairs.

Then, with a carbon copy tucked in her knitting bag, she crossed the street. These murders were awful, they were terrible, but if you were a new writer, you had to keep your head and learn all you could.

Mr. Dixon was sitting behind the lilacs in the swing and as he was as tall from the waist up as from the waist down, she could see his bushy head sticking up over the top of the lilacs that screened the porch.

"That last story of yours, Elva," he said with no preliminaries, "shows you've not got a clear idea, as yet, of the difference in the inductive and the deductive method. The inductive, remember, leads us from the particular to the general, the deductive leads us from the general to the particular. In the case of these murders, we take all the facts in the general picture and . . . Sit down, won't you? Anything new?"

Elva sat down in the hickory rocker, gazed firmly upon Mr. Dixon.

"Professor, I want some active work on this thing," she said pleadingly. "I want to help you. I might as well confess that neither Larry nor O'Nara will take me seriously. But I have much better ideas than they have."

Mr. Dixon thought it over for a second. He said he would need several pairs of legs that day. He had only one pair, so he would need a little help, and please would she read her notes while he concentrated a bit? He had a hunch, he said, that the situation, as dangerous as it had already proved itself to be, might grow worse, that it had not yet reached its peak. It was not, he was convinced,

ready to turn tail and move off. In short, he said, they must ask themselves, "Who next?" And they must stop a third murder. If such were possible.

When she read her notes to him he seemed to be interested in only one thing.

"So Sylvester gave Williams a photograph of Gwendoline? . . . Splendid. Splendid . . . Now we're getting somewhere."

"Are we, Professor?" Elva said discomfited. "Maybe I'm not as bright as I thought. Maybe I'm a dumbbell! What does the photograph mean?"

"It may mean nothing. On the other hand, it may mean that the two murders are connected. That there are two murders but *one* murderer. It's what I've been trying to puzzle out for the last half-hour. Two murders so nearly in the same spot, and within a few days of each other, in a neighborhood that has always been peaceful and quiet, and should be peaceful and quiet—is it not strange?"

Elva laughed shortly. Of course it was strange. His theory fitted Larry's, she said.

"He thinks it's Morrison. How do we know, he says, but that Morrison and Sylvester were deadly enemies? He's going to try to investigate that angle, secretly. Anyway, he thinks Mrs. Morrison is innocent. She didn't commit the second murder, he says, therefore she didn't do the first one. But tell me about the photograph, Professor. Why do you think it's important?"

"All right. At present it's one of the facts in the general picture, but it may be a very significant fact in a particular way when we know more about it. That's all I can say at this moment. We must find out about it. We must trace it."

"Look, Professor," she said eagerly, "let me go after it? Let me try to trace it? I'd love it!"

"How would you go about it?" he said gently.

"Well, first I would interview Mrs. Walters, her aunt. I'd go right out there this morning. I'd say, now what was there between your niece, Gwendoline, dear lady, and Mr. Sylvester, who was killed last night? She gave him her photograph. A dozen years ago, say. Why has he kept it close beside him all these years?"

"Good! And if she tries to conceal what she knows, as she did

with us when we interviewed her, you'll see it. Keep your eyes on her. If she does, then we shall have to find other leads."

Elva looked at him brightly.

"I've another idea or two," she said. She got up. "I'll run change my dress and dash away!"

"Wait," he said. "Let's try an idea of mine first. You know what stream of consciousness is. Lie back in your chair for a moment, with your eyes on the blue ceiling, and tell me what you observed on Monday evening. Blurt out everything as it comes into your mind, after the fashion of a psychiatrist's patient you see in the movie films. I haven't the slightest notion that the films are right. But I want you to do just that. Speak everything as it comes, don't keep anything back, with one exception—don't repeat what the others said when O'Nara interviewed them. I've got that. I just want to see the general picture as you saw it. I want to see it with your eyes."

She chuckled a little, slid her head back on the chintz cushion that was folded over the top of the hickory rocker.

"Better start a little before the murder was discovered," Mr. Dixon said. "That will help get your memory lane open."

"Yes . . . Well, after it began to rain, Betty and I went over from the park, where the fiesta was, to Wisner's and had little cakes and ice cream . . . Then we came home . . . I got out of Betty's car at the corner by the Gallery . . . and got my new open-toed shoes wet in the puddles . . . sopping wet . . . and when I came around the corner I saw the excitement and the police . . . Sergeant O'Nara came along with Peterson . . . but Larry wasn't there. I ran along beside Peterson to ask where Larry was and what had happened . . . and O'Nara asked me to take shorthand notes . . . I went upstairs for my notebook and Elida's door was opened a little . . . but I think I was too excited to realize it then. I went back downstairs with the book and we sat in the dining room . . . I noticed the fine lace tablecloth that had come to Miss Pilsbury from her aunt in Ireland was on the table and was surprised . . . it's used only for special . . . O'Nara smacked his flashlight and notebook down on it . . . At dawn, when I awoke from a dream, I remembered about Elida's door being open . . . I think I remembered it because I'd dreamed about it. So I got up and went

in there, to make sure . . . and the door was opened a tiny crack. I—”

“Wait,” Mr. Dixon said. “The door, I take it, is kept shut?”

“Yes. Locked. Miss Pilsbury won’t rent it. She keeps it just as it was when Elida was alive. Well, I went in and found that the night lamp by the bed was burning . . . I turned it out and locked the door, but left the key in the lock. I couldn’t help wondering if Miss Haddie had gone in there before she went into the garden. I’d seen her go in before, when Miss Pilsbury wasn’t around, of course. She knew the key was kept on the ledge over the door . . . When I came down to breakfast . . . no, I went to your house first, but later, when I came back, I noticed the yellow-bordered tablecloth had been put on the table in the dining room . . . and Aggie was crying . . .”

She paused, lifted her head, smiled at Mr. Dixon.

“But you didn’t ask me about Tuesday morning, did you. Have I given you what you wanted?”

“Yes . . .” His voice sounded far away, remote. “You’ve given me several things to think about. Elida’s opened door . . . and the possibility that Gwendoline went in there before she went into the garden. The changed tablecloth . . . Oh, yes! Why did the light burn in Elida’s room all night? Do you know the answer to that?”

“Well, I suppose Miss Haddie left it on. If she went in there, as she must have. And Miss Pilsbury—being downstairs, and in bed—in the early evening, at least—didn’t know it. It’s not likely she went back upstairs after I got through with the typing. At midnight. I had my door opened. And would have seen her.”

“All right, Elva. See about the photograph at once, please. I must run along and find Joey . . .”

17

MR. DIXON WENT into the house when Elva left, latched the screen door. Joey, he knew, had been there for the kitchen door key was not under the rug. But the door was locked, and no key was visible.

So Joey had probably been there, locked the door again, and carried the key away in his pocket. In good time, Joey would return, right now he must decide on his next move. He must, somehow, see Sylvester's office, and room 14 in the Gallery, where the gun case was. He must see Morrison again, too. He must see the police surgeon's official report on Gwendoline—he did not anticipate any trouble about that. There was Gwendoline's room, too, with the diary and the money still to be found. And he must see Aggie. He ought to see Elida's room, if possible, and talk with Miss Pilsbury and Mrs. Douglas again . . .

He thought of the dialogue between Miss Pilsbury and Mrs. Douglas, the night before, in the dining room. The time, he remembered, was a little after ten, ten-fifteen, maybe, and they were talking about Mrs. Morrison's confession. Miss Pilsbury's, "Where have you been, Christabel, that you hadn't heard?" And Mrs. Douglas' reply, "Well, if I have to be catechized, I went upstairs and lay down without putting on a light . . . I fell asleep from sheer exhaustion." And Miss Pilsbury's caustic answer, "If you don't stop prowling around outside at night, somebody will think you killed Gwendoline!"

The kitten came in from the dining room, arched its yellow back, came over and leaped to Mr. Dixon's knee.

"Suppose," he said, scratching a yellow ear, "that she killed Sylvester? Suppose that's why she has prowled in the garden, watching a chance to slip in when he was alone? She's a little cracked, we'll say, about Athena. But where would Gwendoline come in?"

And there was Williams, as drunk as a lord, saying, "You don't think I'm mixed up in a murder, do you, Professor?"

At the time he thought Williams referred to Gwendoline's murder, but now it was obvious that Williams might just as well have referred to Sylvester's death, for when Williams said that, the curator had been dead for nearly two hours. And Williams had acknowledged that he was with Sylvester in the curator's office in the early evening.

Mr. Dixon stopped his cogitation suddenly.

There was a sound coming out of the wall. It was as if the walls had opened to receive a sleeper, closed again, and the sleeper was snoring.

Mr. Dixon came to his feet, went up the stairs to Freda's small

sewing room, where some very narrow steps led up to the attic. Further investigation showed Joey asleep on some planks laid over rafters, for the attic was unfinished.

"Sit down," Mr. Dixon said quietly. "And tell me why you were hiding."

"I'm wo'n out dodgin' dead people, Mist' Dixon," Joey grumbled. "I was afraid they'd run after me again."

"You've been here ever since you left police headquarters?"

"Yassir. I took some bread and cookies up and et them. I didn't want to go nowhere tills I sees you, Mist' Dixon."

"Which means, I take it, that there's something you didn't tell the police?"

"I answers all their questions, Mist' Dixon. They didn't ast me about that closet door. I couldn't answer, could I, when they didn't ast?"

"What closet door?"

"The one in number 14. Where them guns is, Mist' Dixon."

"All right. Tell me. The whole thing."

"It sho almost gets me down, Mist' Dixon. I had to go in number 14 and dust the cases. I thought I heard a noise. When I jerks around to look, I sees the closet door shuttin' itself."

Mr. Dixon extricated himself from the wave of impatience that swept over him.

"You should have opened the door," he said coldly. "What sort of a fellow are you, anyhow?"

"Mist' Dixon, you don't catch me openin' no door as shuts itself in number 14 at night. Maybe I would in daytime. But not at night. No, sir."

"My God, Joey, the murderer was probably in there! Waiting for his chance to kill Mr. Sylvester. Don't you realize that?"

"I likes Mist' Sylvester all right, Mist' Dixon, but I likes myself a lot better."

"All right. What time did this happen?"

"I was a little late goin' back over there last night. I'd come back here and seen Miss Elva out in front. Then I went into the kitchen to get somethin' to eat when I suddenly recollects I hadn't dusted number 14. Mist' Sylvester never let you get away with nothin'. So I goes back over there. Mist' Brown was fixin' to leave. Then I went in number 14."

"Were any visitors there at the time?"

"No, sir. I didn't see none."

"And you said nothing to Mr. Sylvester about the door?"

"No, sir. Last time it happened, 'fore dark, he had a good joke on me. I just knew I'd better not mention it."

"Oh, so it had happened before?"

"You mean the door, Mist' Dixon?"

"Of course I mean the door. What else would I mean? When did it happen before?"

Joey began looking into the pattern of the wallpaper.

"You mean that time it happened before somethin' happened to Miss Haddie?"

"Yes. When was it?"

"It was afore that, Mist' Dixon. It wasn't dark that time, so I wasn't scairt. I just opens the door to see. An' there was a lady in the closet. As gentiman to gentiman, she was fixin' her garter."

"Who was it?"

Joey stared at the wallpaper, his mouth stubborn. "I ain't recollectin' who it was, Mist' Dixon. Don't expect me to recollect everybody, do you?"

Mr. Dixon kept in his exasperation and reflected that if he tried to get more out of Joey now, the boy might begin to draw on his imagination. It would take patience . . .

"Joey, when a person kills another person he often thinks he has to kill one or two others. Either they know too much for his safety, or he thinks they do. After he kills the first person, it's rather easy to kill the second and third time. This is because the punishment for several murders can be no greater than that for one. Several of us may be in danger now. If you'll do exactly as I say, I'll guarantee you will come to no harm. Will you?"

Joey mopped his brow with a shaking hand.

"Do somebody think I knows too much? Like the book says that Miss Elva gives me?"

"They may think you know too much about where the ash shaker was. And if the murderer was in the Gallery closet, as seems likely, he may think you saw him—or her—and would know his identity. You can't tell me anything more about the ash shaker?"

Joey shook his head.

"We both must be careful, Joey. It's best for a few days that we

don't stay in a room alone with anybody. I'd like for you to sleep over here for the time being. Get some sheets out of the linen closet and fix up the bed in the maid's room. You'll take all your meals here, too. By the way, do you drink milk?"

"No, sir. I never drinks milk at all."

"All right. Don't drink or eat anything outside of this house for a few days. No coffee, tea, milk or anything. If somebody thinks you might know too much, that person might try to poison you. Let's just be careful now."

"You'll be gettin' that fellow right away, won't you, Mist' Dixon?" Joey's voice was shaking.

"I'm hard on his tracks now, Joey. Do what I tell you and you'll be as safe as a kitten on a pillow. Any work to do across the street?"

"Gotta dust for Miss Pilsbury. She gives me five dollars a week to dust an' keep the grass cut."

"All right. Remember what I said. And it must be between us, man to man. Secrecy is part of detecting, you know."

"Mist' Dixon, I'd curse my hide, bones an' marrow if I said a word. I won't even tell Miss Pilsbury. Or Dr. Young. I sho likes him. He give me some pills."

"Some pills? . . . What kind of pills?"

Joey took a small bottle out of his pocket and handed it to Mr. Dixon. It was a brown bottle, with a white label pasted down one side, marked, "Ferrous Sulfate, Exsiccated (Squibb), 3 grains (0.2 Gm.)."

"Iron . . ." he muttered. "I'll have to take a look at this, Joey. It's probably all right. But from now on don't take medicine from anybody—unless it comes in a sealed bottle or box and you get it across the counter at a drugstore. Ask me if you need anything. I'll see to it. And don't forget—fix your bed here, no food or drink outside of this house. Keep out of garages and basements. You don't want to get hurt, do you?"

"No, sir. I sho don't."

"All right. It's early, but I'd better have lunch now. I'll be pretty busy the rest of the day, too busy to stop to eat, maybe."

There was some fresh apple pie he had made the day before, Joey said, and some of Miss Freda's canned chicken he could cream in a jiffy. Store rolls he could warm, too. Yassir!

As Mr. Dixon sat down to lunch, Elva came in. Her face showed that she had garnered a measure of success. "Bring Miss Elva some lunch," he said to Joey. "Then get busy on your own for I shall probably need you soon."

"I don't know . . ." Doubt was beginning to come into Elva's face. "Maybe you won't think it's much, Professor. But there was a connection . . . earlier."

She dropped her voice as she glanced at the swinging door into the kitchen.

"Before Miss Haddie's affair with her cousin's husband she was going everywhere with Mr. Sylvester. Her aunt said all the boys were in love with her. Well, he kept her in candy and flowers for months, came to the house two or three times a week, maybe more."

"They were sweethearts, yes . . ." Mr. Dixon said, nodding his head. "He kept the photograph because he couldn't get over it. Until now. Until he married . . ."

Elva beamed brightly.

"I checked up on Mr. Sylvester a little," she said. "Asked Miss Teller, at the library. He was a member of several of the best clubs, including the Westside Country Club and the Men's Club. Very popular."

"Good work! How'd he get to be curator? Any idea?"

"Pull, I imagine. Somebody had to be and he was well qualified. He'd traveled abroad extensively, Miss Teller said."

"All right. Can you get the two women across the street out of the house for me? Take them to buy groceries, or make any other excuse that comes into your head. Want to examine Gwendoline's room and can do it better if they're out of the house."

Elva looked her delight. Her bright young eyes said plainly, "This is the life!" She ate her pie hastily, left her coffee untasted.

"It's too hot," she said. "And we haven't time to ice it. If anything happens to prevent our going, I'll lower the shade by the hall window. That's the middle window. But I won't fail, I'm sure. Watch, now."

In about five minutes after she left Mr. Dixon took his place by Freda's front window to watch. While he waited he told Joey what he was to do.

"I want to examine Miss Haddie's room while the ladies are gone," he said. "Is the room unlocked?"

"No, sir. The police are through with it but Miss Pilsbury say she don't want to rent it yet. The key's on the ledge over the door."

Presently Elva came out with the two ladies. They got into Elva's car and drove away.

18

MR. DIXON HAD Joey go into Miss Haddie's room with him. Then he shut and locked the door.

"I've brought you with me as a witness," he said. "Just stand by the door and watch me, so that you will see everything I do."

He stood quite still for a moment or two, gazing around the comfortable-looking room, at the neatly-spread bed and evenly-spaced chairs.

His eyes traveled to the French doors and the small balcony beyond. He tried the French doors now, found them locked. There was a heavy, musty smell in the room . . . The harpsichord, still opened and with the stool out, would be Roberta's now, he reflected . . . He went over to the dressing table, pulled out a drawer or two, shut them again.

O'Nara would have gone through the contents of all drawers most thoroughly. The same was true of the closet, where her dresses and coats hung.

He came back to where Joey stood.

"If you were going to hide something in this room, so that nobody would find it, where would you put it, Joey?"

"What kinda somethin', Mist' Dixon?"

"Say a small book. Some money, maybe."

"Don't know about money, Mist' Dixon. But if it was a dime-store book, like you write addresses in, I'd stick it back in the harpsichord, Mist' Dixon."

"Good boy, of course! The harpsichord, by all means!"

He went over to the instrument and stood looking at it for a moment.

"Hm . . . Two banks of keys, all right," Mr. Dixon said. "Over a hundred keys, I'd say, without counting them. Let's raise the back lid!"

"Yassir, I raised it one day and I seen something in there. But I didn't touch it, Mist' Dixon. I never raised it no more. It was away back over there—on the left side."

On a tiny ledge, next to the strings, lay the treasure.

The small diary, with "A Page A Day" in gold letters, and a long blue envelope, were held together by a rubber band.

The envelope was unsealed. Flap tucked under. Inside were five \$100 bills. Being a witness, Joey, with bulging eyes, counted the money.

They went back across the street together in silence, and Mr. Dixon sat down in the library with the diary. It took a good deal of effort to open it and begin reading, seemed like prying into something that was none of his business.

It began with an early April date, and the first entry was an explanatory paragraph or two. "I have returned," she wrote. "I am back for a certain thing," she said, "shall we say to get my mother's desk and the harpsichord? Well, that will do, it will answer very well . . . What luck to get this room, what luck!"

She wrote of her cousin. "Lena won't like it, ha-ha!" She would torture her cousin a little, she would think up ways to do it, she would see what she could see, and as to "him," well, she was through with that forever, for not even ice was colder than dead love's ashes, and what a pity. All that really remained was a shamed wonder that one could ever have been so silly, for he was, after all, just an ugly hunk of a man. That went for all men, they were slimy, all except the captain. A man half-blinded and crippled by the Nazis couldn't very well be slimy.

Here she struck a new note. She would give the captain the tender care of a mother. "It is not that he shall be as a child to me," she wrote, "no it is not that, it is that I shall be as a mother to him. I shall be his eyes and his legs. My poor captain . . ." She would bathe him and dress him and walk him, as one walked a poodle . . .

". . . I received a shock today, for yesterday I saw only my silly aunt, when she drove me over to see Mr. Pomeroy, who is going over the harpsichord for me—he being one of the best harpsichord men in the world—and today I saw my darling. My heart turned

over and I almost burst into tears. What have I done? I ought to be on my knees praying like a nun prays before her altar. It is as clear as crystal that nobody in this house likes me, they hate me, not without cause, but without judgment. Only one is kind, Williams. No one else cares a hoot."

There followed a day-by-day record of unimportant events until well into May.

"... Even Dr. Young seems to dislike me. I am used to men responding to my touch, but if I put my fingers on his arm, he moves away. Yes, he hates me. He probably remembers that I know something about his sister. He hates me because I know where Fanny spent the weekend that time. That has been a long time ago, but he remembers. And so do I, Dr. Young. Patricia Pilsbury is secretly angry because I am here, but who cares? She would probably burst a blood vessel if she knew I open Elida's door and go into the room at my pleasure. What you don't know won't hurt you. My only pleasure here is playing with Roberta in the garden, with Lena glowering from the window. But who cares for her ugly frowns? Not I! Ah, well, a nice, long letter from my poor captain today. Nice he is rich and that I shall live in a grand old mansion. Someday, when he succeeds to the title, I shall be, 'My lady.' Poor fellow. He needs me. I suppose I should tear myself away and run back to England . . ."

There followed some short entries:

"June 5: Peeped in Lena's windows tonight. Have not seen Roberta for several days.

"June 9: Peeped in window.

"June 11: Met Robert in garden. Loads of fun for he was angry. Begged me not to look in Lena's windows again.

"June 14: (Is it the 14th—can't find my calendar.) Well, somebody followed me into the garden tonight. Who was it? I was good and afraid—scared out of my wits!"

There were no more entries. She was killed the night of June 17th. Mr. Dixon copied the June entries carefully and neatly in his pocket notebook. Gwendoline did not say, he reflected, that somebody was in the alley, or even that somebody was in the garden, but . . . "Somebody followed me into the garden," which could well have been the dress rehearsal for murder.

Was she followed from the Pilsbury house? Or, was it after she

left the Morrison window? Somebody could have stepped out from the weigela bush . . . She probably had not seen the person, probably had heard his footsteps there in the darkness.

The telephone in the library rang shrilly. It was Morrison on the wire.

"Sorry to bother you, Professor, but I'm alone for a few minutes. If you can answer my questions, please do so. Anything new—as to the innocence of a certain person?"

"I can't answer that yet," Mr. Dixon said cautiously. "The new turn in events last night certainly cannot harm her case, though. By the way, I found the two articles you spoke of. Hidden in the music box."

There was a slight pause at the other end of the wire.

"Oh, yes. I see. I know what you mean. Anything very compromising?"

"I don't think so. Nothing not already known, so far as she is concerned."

"You will have to turn 'em over, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes. I'll telephone Andy before bedtime tonight."

"And that's all you can say?"

"That's all. Except I'm moving rather fast, I think."

After cautioning Joey again, he got into the threshing machine he called his car. He was feeling horribly unhappy. He did not want to hand over Gwendoline's diary to the police. But the diary was evidence. Perhaps it was because he had once been under the spell of Gwendoline's charm, that he hated now to have her unmasked as vain, cruel, even warped in mind by long-nurtured jealousy.

His mind reverted to Morrison . . . what about Morrison and Sylvester? He must talk with Morrison again. It could be Morrison . . . on the basis that most anything "could be."

The diary brought Dr. Young forward. Well, what if Gwendoline had known something not so pretty about Young's sister? Do men murder for a thing so inconsequential, especially when so many years had passed? Besides, Sylvester had entered the dark picture now . . . two murders, but one murderer. Of that he was sure.

He was glad when he went into O'Nara's office to find Larry the sole occupant.

Larry greeted him with delight. "Sit down, Professor, sit down! I'm expecting the sergeant any minute. Not back from lunch yet. Look, Professor, tell me what you think. Lord, I've been wishing I could talk with you!"

"Well, let me get this off my mind first," Mr. Dixon said hurriedly. "I want to ask a favor. May I see the autopsy surgeon's report on Miss Haddie?"

"Yes, of course, but I suppose you'll have to read it in here, Professor."

Larry got a heavy folder out of a metal filing case, thumbed through until he found the report.

"Sit down over there by the window, Professor, and take your time," he said. "No reason why you can't make notes—on the q.t., of course."

Mr. Dixon sat down by the window and began reading, and as he read, he kept nodding and murmuring, "All right . . . Yes . . . I see . . ." He copied it in his notebook, almost word for word.

"What do you make of it, Professor?"

"Um . . . Besides head and face wounds there were very few scratches or contusions," Mr. Dixon murmured. "Very interesting . . . She fell forward, yes . . . which accounts for the face wounds. Two or three small scratches or contusions on the left hand . . . and on her leg, where her stocking was torn."

Larry nodded. He did not look at Mr. Dixon when he spoke.

"I'm glad her case is cleared, Professor. Very glad."

"Indeed? You think it is cleared?"

"Well, why not, sir? A woman has confessed. And gives an excellent motive for the deed. Jealousy. Bitter jealousy. Perfect motive, wouldn't you say?"

Mr. Dixon looked at Larry with a warm smile.

"You are trying to pull my leg," he said. "Elva has told me that you still believe Mrs. Morrison innocent. In spite of her confession. I congratulate you."

"What are you congratulating him for, Professor?" O'Nara said from the doorway.

"You're making progress, aren't you?" Mr. Dixon said slyly. "Sergeant, I've brought you something. Just between us, you know."

O'Nara stared at him.

"I hope it's good, Professor. I hope it's very good. Up to this moment I've found nothing to congratulate anybody on. I'm in a damned hurry to know what it is."

"Gwendoline Haddie was an old friend of mine," Mr. Dixon said. "I decided to look over her room, now that you were through with it."

Both O'Nara and Larry were looking at Mr. Dixon with faintly worried expressions as he took the diary and the long blue envelope from his pocket and laid them on the desk before O'Nara.

"Found them hidden in the harpsichord," he said laconically.

"Well, I'll be damned!" O'Nara exclaimed. There was explosive irritation in his voice. He slipped the five bills through his fingers, glanced at the opening paragraph of the diary. "You've read this, I suppose?"

"Certainly. Discounted some of it, naturally."

"You being an old friend of Miss Haddie's—you didn't, by any chance, have this already, Professor? I mean—"

"Oh, I was very careful to take a witness in with me, Sergeant. Mrs. Moore and the two ladies were not there, but Joey was available. Joey is my witness. He stayed in the room with me. Saw every move I made. Helped me a little, in fact. I explained to him that he was a witness. And swore him to secrecy, of course."

"Well, the way I look at it, Professor, you probably want something in return for this favor. I'll bet somebody's engaged you on this thing. Morrison, maybe? I happen to know, though, that you're not a lawyer, so haven't the privilege of a lawyer."

"Neither am I a policeman," Mr. Dixon said, picking up the gray cat that had come in and was rubbing against his leg in an overflow of affection. "When I was growing up, Sergeant, I wanted to be a policeman the worst way. Been frustrated ever since. But now that you mention it, there is something I'd like to do. I'd like an order that would let me in the Gallery. I'd like to look around."

"I'll phone the boys," said O'Nara shortly.

"Gosh, Sergeant," cut in Larry from his quiet corner, "let's tell the Professor where we stand. He might have some good ideas he'd give us. Won't hurt to have all the ideas we can get."

"The way I look at it we're getting along very well," O'Nara said shortly. "Captain Kennedy thinks so, too. We have one confession, which we are checking on. And other strong suspects. And

there's still Mrs. Douglas and Miss Pilsbury. Either one could have done it. There's Morrison and that painter, Williams. We're not at all sure, are we, that Miss Haddie didn't keep her appointment with Williams? He could have followed her out, couldn't he? They may have had a quarrel up there in his rooms!"

"That's quite possible, Sergeant," said Mr. Dixon. "I've thought of that, too."

O'Nara nodded, obviously pleased. "As to Morrison and this new murder, naturally he wants his wife acquitted of the Haddie murder. He could argue this way: Here, he says to himself, is a man—Sylvester—close to the spot where the first murder took place. Maybe he has it in for Sylvester anyhow—"

"Oh, Sergeant, you know that won't wash," grumbled Larry.

"You mentioned Williams, I believe," said Mr. Dixon, who was standing up now. "In one murder? Or in both?"

"Williams was on the ground," said O'Nara obstinately. "Opportunity. And means. He was not drunk when he was with Sylvester at the Gallery. We've checked. He leaves, goes out and gets drunk. He could very well have hid round there somewhere—in a closet, say—killed Sylvester after Joey went out, and then skipped."

"Checked on his time—after he left the Gallery?"

"Oh, sure. He didn't go into the bar until after nine. Says he was in the dumps and walked a mile or so first. The thing is, there seems absolutely no sound reason why he'd want to kill Sylvester. We may find one yet. We're checking on everybody. On Brown, at the Gallery—Miss Pilsbury, Mrs. Douglas, of course, Dr. Young. And the cook, Aggie."

Motives were certainly important, Mr. Dixon agreed. He discussed that for a moment, then asked if he could use O'Nara's desk phone. He would be only a minute. He wanted to check on Joey. When he got Joey on the wire, he held the receiver rather far from his ear so that Joey's voice would float about the room . . .

"Mist' Dixon, I'm right here, like you say," Joey told him. "Went out an' do the grass in both places an' dusted for Miss Pilsbury. Locked out of the Gallery, so couldn't dust there. I haven't et anything, like you said. Except here in our kitchen."

"Good work," said Mr. Dixon. "I'll be in to dinner about seven, I think."

When Mr. Dixon cradled the phone, O'Nara was gazing at him intently.

"Damn it, Professor," he demanded, "what's all this about Joey?"

"Oh, that? I'm trying to save Joey's life, Sergeant."

"Now, look, Professor—sit down, for God's sake, and bring your head down out of that chandelier! Now, look, Professor, I'm not exactly mentally deficient. What do you mean you're trying to save Joey's life? Go on, I'm listening!"

"I have a theory about the ramifications of any murder, especially if done by an amateur. I believe Joey's life is in danger, that he may be the third victim. I'm afraid that he may be—well, poisoned, say."

The sergeant's face turned pale. "For God's sake, why poison?"

"Poison would be easy. Usually a murderer repeats himself in his method of murder, as to weapon. This case seems to be an exception. Well, if the two murders were committed by the same person, with different weapons, why not another weapon this time?"

"But why Joey? For God's sake, what makes you think that?"

"Joey knows something, Sergeant, that he shouldn't know for the safety of the murderer. It's all too complicated for him. He's forgotten parts of it right now, but it's liable to burst into his mind any minute. The chances are the murderer knows this as well, and better, than we do."

"How's that again?" the sergeant stammered. "Knows *what*?"

"The furnace shaker disappeared from the garage where he put it several days before Gwendoline Haddie was killed. He came down here and told you that. Remember?"

"Did he? Yes. Go on."

"He remembers now that he saw it somewhere. *After* it disappeared, Sergeant. So far, he can't remember where it was, but all of a sudden some day he will remember exactly where it was. Poor Joey's mind works that way. It will come to him in a flash. And he'll hop all over the place shouting the fact to the treetops. And the murderer knows it. And naturally, will do something about it. And very soon."

"Go on, Professor," O'Nara cried. "What's the rest of the big idea?"

"Only that I think an effort will be made to kill Joey, by poison maybe. *Before* he remembers."

"Wow, Professor, you've got a wonderful imagination!"

"Gosh," Larry said softly.

"Look, Professor," O'Nara said. "Maybe you think it's because I've got the ash shaker and the pistol? Is that it? But wasn't Miss Haddie—"

The expression on the sergeant's face, as he paused, indicated that his conceit had received a crushing blow. "I ought to have seen through your deductions, Professor," he said heavily. "You think the murderer is in the Pilsbury house!"

"Not necessarily. But the ratio is in favor of the Pilsbury house, so far."

O'Nara came to his feet, looked around helplessly.

"Larry, for God's sake take Moriarity out of here," he bellowed. "She's covering everything in sight with those damned cat hairs!"

As Mr. Dixon turned away from O'Nara's door a red-headed young man stopped him.

"I'm Red, of the *Evening Star*," the young man said. "You're helping with these murders, aren't you?"

"I? Great Scott, I'm on the staff of Oakwood College, teach English literature,—and an extension course in fiction writing. The victim of the first murder was a former student at Oakwood."

"Oh, I see, Professor. My mistake. Jeeze, but you're tall! How much?"

"Never mind," said Mr. Dixon. "I was just asking Sergeant O'Nara about the first murder, Miss Haddie's. Seems you've got a splendid homicide squad here, Mr.—er—Red."

"Yeah, I'm on my way in there now," said Red, beaming.

Mr. Dixon stood quite still for a moment listening, an innocent smile spread over his face.

They were difficult and nasty cases, O'Nara told the reporter. Still, they were making progress, and he was at liberty to say so in his paper. They had searched the Haddie room again and found what they had been hoping to find: the diary.

"Good," said the reporter. "Carry on, carry on, Sergeant. Where was it?"

In the harpsichord, O'Nara told him in a velvety voice. It was stuffed so far back that the first search failed to reveal it. But their

motto was, "try, try again," so their search had finally been rewarded. There was money, too. "Five \$100 bills," O'Nara said. "Feel 'em, Red—count 'em!" The diary? Oh, well, of course they were not yet to reveal what was in the diary. Assuredly, the diary would have to wait for the present. Yes, there would be sensational developments very soon . . .

19

MR. DIXON KNEW when he reached the sidewalk that Peterson was following him, but he pretended not to notice.

"Elementary, my dear Watson, elementary," he murmured as Peterson's car trailed him along River Street and turned west . . .

He met Peterson on the Gallery steps with an affable smile.

"The sergeant couldn't raise the boys, Professor, so he sent me," Peterson said, his honest blue eyes on the toe of his boots. "He's sorta on edge today. You know how it is."

Mr. Dixon knew how it was. Peterson said he thought it was going to storm, there was a bad cloud in the west. Mr. Dixon agreed. Peterson shook the locked Gallery door, pushed a button, and Jackson, Peterson's colleague, came over hastily and unlocked the door.

"How about the guards?" Mr. Dixon said. "Have they one or two?"

Peterson said there were two usually but right then one was on vacation until August. The guard that was there was named Hanks. Hanks was never there on Thursday night.

"He sings at St. Stephen's, Professor. They have choir practice on Thursday night."

"So Hanks was at practice last night when Sylvester was killed?"

"That's it. Ought to hear him sing. Got a voice like a river horn."

"Um . . ." said Mr. Dixon. "Then Joey and Mr. Brown were the last ones to see Sylvester Thursday night?"

"That painter, Williams, was in here part of the time. Says he left

early. Well, pretty lucky for the murderer he took Thursday with Hanks gone. Gosh, I say, Professor! Must be somebody as knew choir practice would take Hanks out, wouldn't you say?"

"Probably . . ." Mr. Dixon murmured. "Think I'll sit in here a minute and take a squint at the Hussick picture."

The room smelled of dry paint, he thought . . . of old wood, of brushes, faintly turpentine, of old frames rotting, of banana oil . . . a potpourri of smells.

Mr. Dixon tried to reconstruct the room, with the help of his imagination, as it might have been the night before. How many visitors, besides Williams, had been there? And was the killer then present? Or did he saunter in later, after Sylvester came to that east door and took Williams with him to his office? Or was Williams himself the killer? . . . If so, then he killed Gwendoline, too. . . .

The murderer was smart. Very smart. In the case of the first murder, the victim was struck over the head, the weapon wiped and left for all to see, and the second murder was just as simple. Nothing was overdone, nothing left undone, in either case. How could a love affair, back a dozen years, a love affair that was a mere silken thread, swing out with the strength of a cable and bring death? Still, there was that connection. All right, all right . . .

In room 14 Peterson pointed out the case that had held the gun.

"It's not so old, either, just kinda historical," Peterson said. "Somebody used it in the Spanish war, I think Mr. Brown said."

"Know how long it's been missing from the case?"

"Oh, I don't think it was missing. I think the case was unlocked, maybe, and whoever it was just reached in there and got the gun when the time came."

"When will Mr. Brown be here?"

"Jackson says he ought to be here now. Mr. Dixon, between us, I got respect for Mr. Brown and all that. But he's got a tick in his jaw. And every time the gun was mentioned, when Larry interviewed him, that thing tick-tocked. Now, why should it tick-tock when the gun's mentioned?"

Mr. Dixon shook his head.

"I wish I knew the answer. Has he got an alibi?"

"That's what they say, I don't know as I'd call it airtight."

Peterson went off then to answer a telephone call from head-

quarters and Mr. Dixon opened the closet door, where the murderer, he believed, may have hidden from Joey.

The closet ran back under a second-floor stairway, and seemed not in the least sinister. There were a few paper cartons on the side shelves, some wooden boxes in the back on the floor. The cartons, he found, contained Christmas decorations, for use, probably, on an outside tree. Peterson, coming in at that moment, said the closet door had been examined for fingerprints, but Joey's and Mr. Brown's were the only ones found. They were "legit," Peterson said.

As Mr. Dixon went down the corridor, the assistant curator, Mr. Martin Brown, made an agitated appearance.

In blue trousers and blue tailored shirt, Brown looked like a little tin soldier, with his short lean body, his spare lean face, and his narrow lean shoulders.

"Sit down, please, sit down," he said to Mr. Dixon. "This is terrible, terrible. Cigarette? Do you smoke?"

"Sometimes," said Mr. Dixon, getting out his pipe. "I'm not the police, you know, Mr. Brown. But I have . . . well, let us say, an academic interest in the case."

"I'd be glad to tell you anything, if I knew anything." Mr. Brown's high falsetto squeaked painfully. "But I don't know anything."

"All right. As I understand it, the guard, Hanks, was at choir practice last night? Left at eight o'clock, you took over? Just as you were leaving, Joey came back to dust room 14? Which he says he forgot to dust earlier?"

"Well, I don't think Joey killed him, I really don't," Brown said, using his handkerchief, for it was very warm. "No, I really don't. Mr. Sylvester wouldn't think so either, if he were here. He thought Joey a fine boy, very faithful."

"What I want to ask you, Mr. Brown, is this—can you give me an idea of how many visitors were in during the evening? And were they people you were acquainted with? I mean, the usual crowd?"

Mr. Brown yanked a drawer open, jerked out a paper.

"I have it all down here," he said. "Thursday is a poor night, a very poor night. It's the maids' day off, the older folks stay in, wife

tired from cooking, with the maid off, doesn't want to go out, and all the churches have choir practice that night, and Hanks, our guard, was at choir practice, but I told you he was at choir practice, didn't I? Well, there were twenty-eight persons in between seven and nine o'clock, and ten of these were from an art class in Kipps High, with their teacher, which made eleven, ten being students, and twelve of the others I knew by sight or personally, I mean, to a degree. I saw them come in and I think I saw 'em go out, but I can't be sure of course. Six I didn't know at all, but I had my eye practically on them every minute. You see, we don't let 'em bring in bags or umbrellas, nothing in which anything can be carted away in, we don't want anybody slitting canvases out of frames and hiding them, you see, everything must be checked—we lost a fine miniature a year ago. Tommy Benter, a high school boy, has charge of the checking room on Thursdays—until Woods gets back first of August. Tommy had to leave at fifteen to nine, and as I said, Hanks was at choir practice."

"What time did you leave?"

"Oh, dear, I thought I told you at ten to nine. You see, the reason I could leave then was because the last of the visitors went out with Tommy, and I could get away. Joey had come in, and Sylvester, poor man, was in his office, so I left. At ten to nine. Got home in ten or fifteen minutes. Not knowing what was coming. I didn't check on the minute. I sat in my living room the rest of the evening with my wife and her sister—Josie was spending the night with us. They can vouch for me. Went to bed at eleven—wound the clock first, always wind it on Thursday. Eight-day clock, and just got started winding on Thursday. You know the rest, Professor Dixon."

"Mr. Brown," Mr. Dixon said gently, "why are you so nervous?"

"Goodness," Mr. Brown said, half rising from his chair. "You'd be nervous too, wouldn't you? He was a friend, well, maybe not exactly a friend socially. I mean by that, he never invited me and my wife to his parties, he was what Josie calls snooty, but he was a close associate, and naturally I feel it."

"All right, Mr. Brown. Now the person who shot Mr. Sylvester obviously came in last night. And just as obviously didn't go back out. Not until he had accomplished what he came for. What is

your opinion? Who could have benefited from Sylvester's death? Who were his enemies? Who hated him?"

"I'm a dud when it comes to puzzles. I can't even do a crossword. Josie and my wife do 'em all. Now, both Josie and my wife say maybe Mrs. Douglas did it. She's the only one I know who really hated him. Not only was she mad about that Athena thing but they had a squabble years ago over one of those conducted tours to Paris. But the point I have to make—I told both Moore and Sergeant O'Nara—is that I didn't see her in here last night. I positively did not."

"All right. But she could have slipped in through the back door and you might not have known it. Couldn't she?"

"That's what the sergeant said, right off. Well, she could. The back door was left open on account of its being so hot and the screen may not have been latched. It should have been. But Joey says it wasn't latched when he came in. This is terrible!"

"All right. Let's leave that. Why wasn't the gun case locked? The idea seems to be it was left unlocked."

Mr. Brown's watery blue eyes were slowly raised, and the tick in his jaw began to work like a pistonrod.

"Oh, my, this is terrible," he said dolefully. "I'll probably lose my job! About two weeks ago I unlocked the gun case. Some friends of mine were in from Pittsburgh and wanted to see those arrows in the far end of the case, and Mr. Sylvester came to the door and called me. I went over to him, couldn't have been out more'n five minutes. When I came back to lock the case I couldn't find the key. It's against the rules, positively. Never did find it. I'm not strong and I like my work here, but I'll probably lose my job!"

"I hope not, Brown. Now tell me, who was in the room when you left the case to speak to Mr. Sylvester? The day the key was lost?"

"I've been working on a list all day. I'm sure I don't remember them all. It was Sunday and folks like to come in on Sunday. I remember a few who were here. Those friends I spoke of. Five from Pittsburgh. We had several small exhibits—loaned, you know—and I can remember Miss Stevens and Miss Russell, from that branch library, were here. And Mrs. Morrison, Mrs. Douglas and Miss Pilsbury. And Mr. Williams, the painter—he comes in a great deal. Oh, yes, and Dr. Young. Don't see him often. We don't open until four on Sundays. So they were all here about the same time.

My friends waited and went home with me to Sunday supper. We invited Mr. Sylvester and his wife, but they didn't come. They never came when we invited them."

"The person who took the key couldn't have planned it ahead of time. He couldn't have foreseen that you would leave the case unlocked."

"That's what Josie said. 'Take it from me, Mart,' she said, 'it was somebody as saw it and was ready to act, somebody that had been waiting a long time for just that case to be open,' which sounded very silly to me, Professor Dixon . . ."

As Mr. Dixon went out through the main exhibit room a small and lovely Botticelli face came in from the front.

"Mr. Brown's wife," whispered Jackson as he opened the big outer door. "Some men have all the luck!"

Mr. Dixon agreed. Then he asked Jackson to tell Peterson that he was going home—he was suddenly very tired of Peterson.

"The storm is certainly not far off," he said looking out at the coppery sky.

At the curb by the narrow sidewalk stood a freshly-painted but ancient Ford, and behind the wheel was a second Botticelli. This small and lovely face was as much like the small and lovely face he had passed in the exhibit room as one bluebird is like another. Twins, of course . . . and this twin, gazing at him with an intensity greater than his height alone would justify, must be the sister-in-law, Josie.

Those eager, gazing dark eyes never left Mr. Dixon as he went up to the car.

"You are Miss Josie, aren't you?" he said, removing his hat with as gallant a sweep as Miss Josie had probably ever seen.

"And you are the tall professor, yes?" she replied. "Professor Dixon? You see, my brother-in-law phoned us you were here. And we came immediately."

"That's why you came, Miss Josie?"

"Well, yes. You see, Mart gets so nervous and we do not like for him to be nervous. We're afraid he'll get sick. And it's all so silly, so perfectly silly."

Mr. Dixon looked around at the Gallery speculatively. He was thinking of Peterson.

"Miss Josie," he said with great earnestness, "will you walk to the corner with me? I have a question to ask and I think you are the one to ask . . . and I don't want that policeman coming out to join us . . ."

"The police, they are terrible, yes?" she said, getting out of the car.

"They have their work to do, of course," he said. "If they are stupid sometimes I suppose they cannot help it, eh?"

Her face cleared.

"The good God he gives brains, or he doesn't give brains, yes?" she said. "It is true. What is the question, Professor?"

Mr. Dixon kept his round boyish eyes fixed on the sky.

"It's this, Miss Josie," he said softly. "Why is your brother-in-law Mart so nervous?"

"You do not look at me, Professor," she said. "Tell me, would it be in the confidence?"

He looked down at the little Botticelli then and smiled.

"Unless it's something the law would require me to tell, my answer is yes. If it is evidence, closely connected with the murder itself, I'd have to report it. Or go to jail."

"Oh, it is not the evidence," she said almost vehemently. "It is . . . what do you call it? Public property? Like your Bunker Hill or your Gettysburg. You see what I mean, Professor Dixon?"

"You mean it is something that happened long ago, and in that sense, is like history?"

"Yes, that is it," she said triumphantly. "He would not think of it at all except that he is not strong. You see, long before he met Rosa and me, when he was just a boy, you might say, in early college, Mr. Sylvester cut him out."

"Cut him out? . . ."

"Yes. He cared then, very hard. But he do not care now. He is very happy to love Rosa, who is good to him and nobody can cut him out."

For a few seconds Mr. Dixon's heart thumped sharply against his ribs. A streak of lightning cut the darkness of the sky . . .

"Long ago Mart forgot," she said firmly. "How could he care about a dead girl?"

"Was the dead girl Gwendoline?" he said evenly but softly. "Miss Haddie?"

"No, no," said Josie. "Not the poor Miss Haddie that was killed by that jealous woman! No, no. It was Elida. The beautiful Pilsbury girl. She died about five years ago. She was very beautiful, they say, but Mart, he long ago forgot. It was the pup's love, he said. Look, Professor—the rain! I must run back!"

The storm broke while he stood and watched as she ran back to the car and jumped in. The dull coppery sky had turned almost black, but now that the rain had begun to fall, almost in torrents, it would soon brighten again.

He had covered about sixty feet of sidewalk before he remembered that his car was parked at the far end of the Gallery block. He decided not to go back. It was nearer to Freda's house.

Besides, somebody was calling his name. It was Miss Pilsbury, from her side door.

"Come in here, Professor," she cried. "Come in quickly—or you'll get soaked to the skin!"

20

EVEN IN THE small side entrance hall of the Pilsbury house, which had only a few pieces of necessary furniture, neatness seemed to be the order of the day. The warm yellow wallpaper was mellow with age but its satiny finish was unmarred by dust or scratch and the floor between the islands of crocheted rugs, round and green, shone like a lake in sunlight. Aggie took Mr. Dixon's hat to shake on the enclosed back porch to get rid of disfiguring raindrops. And Aggie was to bring tea, Miss Pilsbury said, for four o'clock was her tea hour, and they would have it in her small private sitting room, whose east windows opened out on the street, and let in the smell of rain on dust and the fragrance of flower petals, bruised in the hard patter. The surface of the mahogany tea table was as clear as a piece of glass . . . with Miss Pilsbury, just as neat and shining, sitting behind it. Her hair was as thick, his thoughts ran on, as a horse's mane, and in spite of its exquisite coiffured state, its abundance and thickness gave her a slightly old-fashioned look.

"I don't often have my tea in here," Miss Pilsbury said, almost *sotto voce*. "But one must have a little privacy occasionally. Poor Christabel is in such a state! Her poor nerves, you know. She's been like my shadow all day! I had just persuaded her to lie down in her room when I saw you. I really wanted very much to talk to you, Mr. Dixon."

"Yes," Mr. Dixon said. "I'm very glad you called me. Very glad."

Aggie had not yet brought in the tea and for this reason, perhaps, conversation remained static for a few minutes and concerned chiefly the storm, its manner of approach, the odd coppery color of the sky, and the final suddenness of the downpour.

"Now," Miss Pilsbury said when the tea was there and the door shut behind Aggie. Did he take sugar? One lump, or two? "Sugar," she said, "gives quick energy. But too much, of course—which I try never to forget—makes you stout!"

Mr. Dixon smiled and dropped another lump into his cup.

"Now, Mr. Dixon, I want to ask you, what do you think of Mr. Williams?"

"You mean about his—er—state last night?" Mr. Dixon said a little dubiously. "Being a little balmy?"

"Mr. Dixon, all men are alike!" she said. "Let a man get drunk and every man in sight runs to his assistance, not only physically, but morally."

"I'm afraid you're right," Mr. Dixon confessed affably. "But really, Williams did not pass out. True, he needed a little assistance up the steps . . . But perhaps you don't mean that, Miss Pilsbury?"

"No. I don't mean that. He told me, Mr. Dixon, that he was at the Gallery last night. He acknowledges he was with Mr. Sylvester quite some time. It looks . . . Well, I wondered what you thought, Mr. Dixon?"

"I don't know what to think," he said with an air of caution. "We must get all the facts together, I think, before we allow our conclusions to crystallize. That will save any false starts, you know."

"You are very wise," she said. "I realize it. Are you working on it, Mr. Dixon?"

"Not officially, or perhaps I should say, professionally. All puzzles interest me. And then Gwendoline was an old friend of mine."

"I understand, Mr. Dixon. Now, if there is anything I can do to help you, do tell me. Be frank. Is there?"

He thought of that for a moment while he sipped his tea.

"As a matter of fact, my answer is yes," he said. "One thing is, I'd like to talk to Aggie. On the chance that Mrs. Morrison's confession is false, made because of her love for her husband. Aggie might have seen or heard something in the alley or the rear garden, without realizing its importance. Don't you think?"

"It's possible. I've talked to her, though. And she says not. Something may have come to her . . . So often our minds work that way."

"On these long June evenings I know it's still daylight when Aggie leaves, that is, the chances are it's daylight. And what she saw, if she did see anything, would happen after dusk. Perhaps, occasionally, say, she doesn't leave so early?"

Miss Pilsbury's black coiffure bobbed affirmatively.

"Frequently on ironing days, Tuesdays," she said. "Especially since our second maid has been away. We have dinner a half hour late on Tuesdays because of the ironing. Aggie is a good, honest girl, and I like her. But she's just a little slow. Slow but thorough. You certainly have my permission to talk to her, Mr. Dixon."

"Thank you," he said. "After we've had our tea?"

"As good a time as any. But you go in alone. Just barge into the kitchen and start talking. That would be the best way. She will feel freer if I'm not there."

"Probably. That being human nature, I suppose. Now, as to the other. Elva told me that on the night that Gwendoline was killed, when she went upstairs to get her notebook, she noticed that the door to your sister's room, which she says you keep locked, was slightly open. She had the idea that maybe Gwendoline went into the room before she went into the garden."

Miss Pilsbury stared beyond him to the rain-spattered windows with frightened eyes, and her longish face looked pinched and white.

"Why, Mr. Dixon, did Elva think Gwendoline went into my dead sister's room?" she stammered. "I keep it locked. Locked!"

"Elva said as much," he said gently. "She also said that once, when you were away, Gwendoline went in there. She found the key over the door on the ledge and went in. She was, I fear, a bold girl . . . Now, what I'd like to do is to see the room. It might possibly give me an idea about what Gwendoline was after."

He looked down into those dark eyes.

"I've heard that your sister was a beautiful woman," he said, "Very beautiful."

The words seemed to touch her like a wand. Her eyes brightened. "Elida was, indeed, very beautiful," she said softly. "I have kept her room as a shrine. Everything she touched is there. Her bits of jewelry, her clothes. Everything! You are more than welcome to see the room. Go up alone. The key is still on the ledge. I put fresh flowers in there this morning. You will see her portrait over the fireplace."

"You are very kind," Mr. Dixon said gratefully, for that was exactly what he wanted. To go into Elida's room alone.

The room, Mr. Dixon thought, was a facsimile of the house itself, in a way. It had the same extreme neatness, the same air of perfection. White walls. Gay chintz window and bed draperies and chair covers. A bright rose-colored carpet of broadloom, that sucked your feet down like Kentucky grass, covered the floor completely. On one end of the mantel was a fresh bouquet of pink althea blossoms.

He gave a quick glance at the portrait over the mantel. It was, he realized fully, the portrait of a very beautiful woman but he had not come into the room to gaze at Elida, however fascinating her portrait was.

He walked over quietly to a door, which he surmised must lead to a bath or closet. It revealed a short passage, one side being a bath, the other a long dressing closet, with a small round window overlooking the street.

A gold-mesh bag, its glitter only slightly tarnished, lay on the immaculate cloth of the dressing table, a pair of blue suede gloves, showing signs of wear, lay beside the bag. Not a particle of dust or film had collected on anything. The gold-mounted handmirror, the comb and brush to match . . . The owner, it seemed, must be near, everything appeared to be waiting. There was a blue opaque glass powder box; musical, Mr. Dixon thought, and lifted the lid. He dropped it quickly to stop the tinkle-tinkle of the *Blue Danube Waltz*. Gently he pulled open the dresser drawers, closed them when he saw neatly-folded lingerie. Handkerchiefs and stockings in the top drawers, lingerie in the lower drawers.

To the right of the small window extended a long rack that was full of frocks and gowns in gay colors. On a shelf over the rack was a row of hats, standing neatly on small hat-trees, such as you see in millinery windows. The room smelled strongly of stale sachet. Mr. Dixon would have liked to sit down on the curved dressing-table bench and think it over . . . the problems that were pressing . . . Curiosity had brought Gwendoline in the first time. That was natural, with a girl like Gwendoline. But the second time? Or, did she really come in that night when the light burned all night? He went out, put the key on the ledge over the door . . .

Miss Pilsbury was sitting on the cushioned window bench in the dining room.

"A beautiful room and a beautiful portrait," he said kindly. "There was no reason why Gwendoline should have gone in there. Pure idle curiosity, I'd say. Your sister was indeed a beautiful woman."

"She was like a flower," Miss Pilsbury said softly. "She was much younger than I, you know. When she was a child I used to call her 'Rosebud.' Some women, when they are beautiful, are like the camellia, glossy to look at, but without fragrance. She was full of fragrance . . . always doing somebody a kindness. So patient, too, during her long illness . . . three years, Mr. Dixon, just pining away, so dear and faithful . . ."

When Mr. Dixon went into the kitchen Aggie was slipping golden cookies into a jar with a long-handled pancake turner. The hot kitchen had two layers of smells. Spiced pickles and ginger cake. Mr. Dixon's nose never mistook the smell of ginger cake. He conveyed this information to Aggie. Her cheeks, already flushed with the heat of the kitchen, flushed anew with pleasure. "It's just like I say to my husband, Frank, all men like ginger cake," Aggie said, slipping a fat piece of the cake on a blue butter plate and handing it to Mr. Dixon. "Wait till I get you a fork."

She produced one from a neat row in a cabinet drawer, and Mr. Dixon sat down on a little white-and-red stool by a window. This was the life, he told Aggie, sitting in somebody's kitchen, eating ginger cake.

"Mrs. Nash has a nice kitchen, too, only she ain't there to make ginger cake," Aggie said with an arch smile. "It's like I say to

Frank, it was sure nice of Mrs. Nash to let you have her house while she's gone."

Mr. Dixon, munching ginger cake, agreed about this and then brought the subject skilfully to the matter in hand. He had a few questions he wanted to ask, he said. He was asking them with Miss Pilsbury's permission. Would she go back to Monday, the day Miss Haddie was killed, or the few days that went before, and try to remember if she had seen anything unusual?

"Miss Haddie was an old friend of yours, wasn't she?" Aggie said, and made clucking sounds of sympathy. "But I don't recall anything. I never snoops, Mr. Dixon. It's like I say to Frank, you can't suspicion people, not from where I am in the kitchen."

Mr. Dixon nodded approval.

"And many times the person who does snoop doesn't really learn anything," he said artfully.

Aggie agreed wholeheartedly.

"Well, I never told this to a soul, for I know how to hold my tongue, Mr. Dixon," she said. "I don't go around beating a drum. Frank says I'm an idiot, and Miss Pilsbury says I'm one, too. But I seen Dr. Young follow her in the garden one night. I worked late that night and I seen him plain as I see you."

Mr. Dixon sighed at this bit of information and gazed gloomily out the window at his elbow.

"Ummm . . ." he murmured. "Miss Aggie, let's go back to Monday night itself, the night she was killed. Try to remember if there was anything unusual. Did you see anybody in the house do anything that struck you as being out of the regular routine, anything at all that surprised you?"

Aggie, standing akimbo, looked at him pityingly.

"Nothing anybody does surprises me, Mr. Dixon," she said drily. "No, sir. I take it or leave it. Could you mean the cups and saucers in the sink? Well, Joey had made them coffee when the sergeant was here and hadn't washed the cups and saucers and I said, next time, Joey, you'll please wash up your dirt, but everything else was okay, a fresh tablecloth was on in the dining room, and the windows open, airing the room . . ."

When Mr. Dixon went back into the dining room, Miss Pilsbury was still sitting on the window bench.

He shook his head and shrugged.

"She had neither seen nor heard anything," he said *sotto voce*. "Except the one thing which, I take it, she confided to you?"

"About Dr. Young being in the garden?"

"Yes . . . That."

"I told her she was silly. He had some other reason for being in the garden. After all, the garden is for all my guests."

"Yes, she told me. She makes wonderful ginger cake, Miss Pillsbury. Wonderful! Had a big slice."

"Aggie's a fine cook," Miss Pillsbury said with pleasure in her eyes. "Flighty, but a good girl."

Five o'clock, but the storm was over as he took his leave. The streets were veritable rivers. Water a foot deep in places. But the sun had burst through the clouds. Already, as he went up the block to his car, the birds had begun their loud twittering.

He bumped his head as he got into his car. He usually did. He sat there a minute, rubbing his head, and thinking.

He had one more thing to do before he telephoned Andy Beavers . . .

He ought also to have a talk with Williams, but that could wait.

It was not by accident that Mr. Dixon walked in a rear door of the hospital, reserved for doctors and nurses. There were four down-steps on the left and four up-steps on the right. Without hesitation he took the steps on the left, which stopped short at a glass-panelled door. There was a thin and immaculately white curtain on the inner side of the door which, he could see, belonged to a small waiting room. It was more than a waiting room, he reflected, for there were white metal cupboards along two sides of the room, with glassed doors neatly closed.

"Doctors never marry nurses, except in novels, my dear," a pleasant soprano was saying. "It's the bunk!"

Mr. Dixon cleared his throat gently, brought his boyish face around to the edge of the door, peeped in timidly at the girls grouped at a table in the corner. A plump brown-eyed girl, with a nurse's cap hanging precariously to a mass of brown curls, saw him and came over.

"I'm afraid you're in the wrong department," she said pleasantly. "Whom did you wish to see?"

"Er—Dr. Young," he said. "Just a friend. Passing, you know. Could I have just a moment to say hello?"

The girl beamed at him.

"Suppose you try his basement office there," she said, pointing down the narrow bricked hall. "Third door to the right. He's there, I know. Better hurry—before he gets away."

Mr. Dixon thanked her and came up before the door indicated in time to hear voices.

"Better not leave until I come back from dinner, Miss Larson."

"Yes, Dr. Young."

"Have Miss Thornton stay with the patient while you have something on a tray."

"Yes, Dr. Young."

Miss Larson came out, lifted her eyebrows at Mr. Dixon, turned, looked back with a smile, and went on her way.

Mr. Dixon stepped inside the room.

"You're probably not expecting me," he said, a little embarrassed by the low ceiling. Another inch and he would have had to stoop. "I should have telephoned?"

"On the contrary, I am expecting you," Dr. Young said pleasantly. "I've been expecting you all week. Only I expected you in my office upstairs. Aren't you lost down here?"

"No. I only pretend to be lost. Came in the back way, object being to cut red tape. Could you give me ten minutes?"

"Sit down, Professor. Glad to see you. What's on your mind?"

Mr. Dixon sat down, pulled his pipe out of his pocket, put it back hastily.

"I'm surprised," he said. "You really have a wonderful bedside manner. I hadn't suspected it! Then you know, if you've been expecting me, why I'm here?"

"To ask questions about Miss Haddie's death? Nobody seems to be satisfied about Mrs. Morrison's confession—with one or two exceptions, of course."

"All right. Now, between us, Doctor, do you believe her story?"

Dr. Young toyed with a glass paperweight for a moment.

"Honestly, I don't know what to think," he said slowly. "If she's innocent, then she must be off balance. Wait a moment!"

Dr. Young pressed a button, told the nurse who answered the call to see that he was not disturbed until he put a call through again.

"I suppose," he said, turning to Mr. Dixon again, "you are convinced that her confession is phony? I'd like your opinion on that."

"I'm not entirely satisfied," Mr. Dixon said. He had no intention

of giving his opinion as to why. Not just yet. "Let's take the theory that somebody in the Pilsbury house did it . . ."

Dr. Young smiled broadly.

"That would make me a suspect, too, wouldn't it? Seriously, though, I've thought that somebody from outside the block did it, some unknown enemy, or a tramp, you know. I don't know what to think about the Sylvester murder. Don't know anything about it, in fact."

"All right. Your room is well situated to see the gardens. Did you see Miss Haddie making any of those peeping pilgrimages?"

"Once. I've not mentioned it, as naturally I'd like to keep out of it if possible, and as it was perfectly well established that she took these excursions across the two gardens, I saw no reason to mention it. In fact, I followed her that night part way."

Mr. Dixon studied him gravely for a moment.

"Followed her?" he said. "When was that?"

Dr. Young reached for a call-book, flipped the pages, closed the book, pushed it aside.

"It was on June 12th. I had—"

"Wait," Mr. Dixon said. "Her diary had it June 14th."

"Oh, so there was a diary?" Dr. Young's bedside manner faded. "So, you are checking up on me?"

"The diary did not say it was you who followed her," Mr. Dixon said precisely. "It said merely that somebody followed her. Apparently she had no idea who it was. I'm merely checking on the date to see if they coincide. I recall now that she said something about being confused on the dates. Go on, please. I am perfectly honest with you, Dr. Young."

"Thanks. Well, it was June 12th. I had a consultation call out at Wash Hill. Thirty miles west, you know. Got over there about six-thirty, got back about nine. Had to drive a mile between an apple orchard and a cornfield, so my car was pretty dusty. I'd put the lights out and shut the doors, which lock inside, before I remembered the dust. Both sets of doors being glassed, they let in enough light for me to see, so I took one of the dust rags Miss Pilsbury always has hanging on hooks and wiped off the car without bothering to turn the electric lights on. And saw her."

"She didn't know you were in the garage?"

"That's right. I saw her when I came over to the small door to

leave. She was already beyond those lilac bushes. I thought at first it was a prowler. It was too dark in that part of the garden to see her clearly, so I followed her until I saw her come out on the Morrison drive. I went on back then without speaking to her. Personally, I've a feeling the thing won't be solved."

"It will be solved. Very soon, I think. Remember—'So full of artless jealousy is guilt, it spills itself in fearing to be spilt?' Now, take this new murder. Did you know Sylvester well?"

"No. I'm rather new to this place." Dr. Young shot a side-glance at Mr. Dixon.

"How do you work, Professor? How is it you arrive at your conclusions?"

"All right. Professionals, almost without exception, depend upon externals. Incidents, finger prints, weapons, brow-beating, and so on. Naturally they hit upon the truth many times, especially when the criminal is a professional, or, let's say, when he has an inferior mind. I depend upon—well, conversation, let's say. The guilty person will tell you, if you give him a large enough opportunity, that he's guilty. A sort of 'Oh, Sammy, Sammy, vy worn't there a alleybi?' attitude, you know."

"I see." Dr. Young reflected a moment. "That's why you are giving me a chance to talk now?"

"I couldn't very well slight you, could I?" asked Mr. Dixon pleasantly.

Dr. Young laughed shortly, toyed with the glass paperweight again.

"So she kept a diary?" he repeated, looking up. "I hadn't heard of it."

"No," agreed Mr. Dixon calmly. "It has just been found."

"Just found? Today, you mean?"

Mr. Dixon let that pass without an answer.

"Nothing in the diary, Dr. Young, will be made public if it has no bearing on these two murders."

"What in the hell do you mean?" Dr. Young demanded sharply.

"She seemed to think you hated her."

"Hated her? I?"

Dr. Young looked up at Mr. Dixon with eyes that seemed suddenly to ice over, and his voice, when he spoke, was thin.

"Is this one of your 'large enough opportunities' that you spoke

of? For me to show my supposed guilt to your eagle mind?"

"Not necessarily. Unless the guilt is there. The point I was trying to put over was that she seemed to think you hated her. True or not, Dr. Young, that's not a very nice thing for the police to find in a murdered girl's diary."

"My God, no. Why, in the name of all, should she have thought I hated her? You can't very well hate frippery chaff or froth, can you?"

"She was a damn' attractive woman," Mr. Dixon said coldly.

"H'm . . . Glad you thought so. I can assure you she was as transparent as glass to me. I have no patience with her type!"

"Oh, you haven't? You really did hate her? She wasn't imagining it?"

Dr. Young gave a short, rueful laugh.

"So that's the way it works? You trap your victims into acknowledging whatever it is you want them to acknowledge? My God, you're clever!"

"All right. Let's get back to our muttons. She gave her reasons, unfortunately, for thinking you hated her."

Dr. Young's slim fingers released their hold upon the paper-weight.

"Yes?" he said, his voice still thin and icy. "I must ask you, and I think you will concede that it's a fair question, to tell me what was in the diary that concerned me."

"It was only an ambiguous sentence or two. I'm sorry, but it had to do with some youthful escapade of your sister's."

"What?" Dr. Young, outraged, rose to his feet. "My sister? How do you know it was my sister?"

"She said your sister. You knew they were acquainted, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't have remembered if she hadn't reminded me. She said one day she used to know my sister before she went to Europe. How did she dare!"

"So she reminded you? . . ."

Dr. Young sat down heavily.

"Yes, she reminded me. I'm afraid I'm acting rather childishly. You can understand—you've plucked the right strings, you know. Very clever. Where is this precious diary?"

"O'Nara has it."

"So it will be public property! Newspapers, I suppose?" Dr. Young brushed his hand over his forehead. "I wouldn't mind, really, if . . ."

"If it were just yourself, and not your sister?" Mr. Dixon said. "Of course. As I told you, I'm sure it will not be made public if it has no bearing on the crime."

"Well, you have seen the diary. If they show it to you, they'll show it to others."

"It was I who found the diary," Mr. Dixon announced coolly. "I had a witness when I was looking for it. Which was a necessary precaution on my part. But the witness did not see the inside of the diary. And will not be permitted to read one line."

Dr. Young reflected a moment. Before he could, apparently, gather up the threads of his thoughts, the loud speaker was calling, "*Dr. Young! Dr. Young! Dr. Young!*"

Out on the street, Mr. Dixon looked at his watch. It was ten minutes to six and the sun was slanting down on the wet streets. Miraculously the skies were clearing. Everywhere the queer copery color had given way to blue . . .

Mr. Dixon drove to Morrison's office with his mind full of serious reflections. He was pleased with his day's work—and yet not entirely satisfied; pleased that he had succeeded in making all the interviews he had planned, with the exception of one with Mrs. Douglas, dissatisfied that his conclusions were not yet complete. The interview with Mrs. Douglas could wait until after he phoned Andy Beavers. It would have to wait. He must talk again with Williams, too. But it could wait too.

In the hall that led to Morrison's door he suddenly stopped short. Then he walked over to the window and examined the notes he had made of the autopsy surgeon's report. Yes . . . her finger—the one with the diamond ring—was bruised, the report indicated . . . Her hand had been clenched and the killer had tried to force back the fingers . . . to remove the diamond . . . For a long moment he stood by the window gazing down at the great river. Taking his pipe out of his pocket, he thrust it, cold and empty, between his teeth and turned toward Morrison's door. He felt slightly bewildered, and very unhappy.

SHORTLY AFTER DINNER that evening a question began tugging at Elva's mind: Where was the key to the gun case? She sat in the swing, thinking. Why, she asked herself, hadn't the murderer tossed the key down beside Sylvester's body with the weapon? She knew the answer to that question. Every murderer, however clever, overlooks something, forgets something.

At ten o'clock Elva undressed, turned off the light and lay on her bed against the window. She could hear the faint sound of chatter downstairs. Mrs. Douglas and her brother, Henry Webb,—who had arrived a half-hour earlier from Philadelphia—and Miss Pilsbury were in the dining room, which was just under Elva's room. Elva had no intention of going to sleep until Larry came, but it was cool and pleasant by the window and she was dozing before she knew it. The deep-toned bell of the hall clock, striking eleven, awoke her.

A deep silence lay over the house now and the thin knife-edge of light was no longer around her door from the hall light. She was terribly sleepy but she must go downstairs and see if the inside bolt had been left off for Larry.

With quilted bath-slippers on her feet, she crept quietly down the stairs, found the bolt was still off, and started back up. At the top of the curving stairway, when she was within ten feet of her door, she heard a sound on the floor above her, the third floor. She moved around the turn of the hall and looked up the flight of stairs that led to Williams' apartment and to the attic. There was no light to be seen. She knew then that the sound she had heard was the soft clicking of a door latch. It must be Williams, shutting his door for the night.

She slipped quietly back into her room and to bed. And had almost fallen asleep again when a soft thud on the floor above her ceiling aroused her. Somebody was in the attic! For the attic was over her room, Williams' apartment being over the front and west part of the third floor. And somebody was up there! The luminous

hands of the clock on the night table between the twin beds showed that it was twenty-five minutes after eleven.

She got up again very quietly and sat in the wing chair by the corner window. She could not see the street, but she could see the Morrison house and the Gallery, both looking dark under a bright starry sky. No light was visible from the downstairs part of the Pilsbury house, either, or from Dr. Young's room—or from the attic. She fixed herself comfortably in the chair. She was going to sit right there and stay awake until Larry came. She was going to say, "Let's go up and see who is in the attic!" But when Larry came finally, picked her up and laid her gently on her bed, she was sleeping so soundly she knew nothing about it . . .

The light wakened her early. For a moment her drowsy thoughts were solely of the sunshine that streamed across her bed. Yes, it was morning, clear and bright, and she loved it even if she was still sleepy. A morning like this, she thought, and sniffed the air, tasted it. A few days earlier the scent that came in was unbearably sweet lilacs but now it was almost unbearably sweet honeysuckle vine, that had come from Georgia, Miss Pilsbury said. She began remembering the events of the evening before . . .

She remembered something else, turned over. Larry! She remembered sitting down in the wing chair by the window. She had gone to sleep, of course, and the beast had got her into bed without waking her! She would like to be cross about it but the poor darling looked so tired, lying there on his pillow. This detective stuff was a dog's life, not at all like the stuff she had dreamed it would be. When she got to selling carloads of stories maybe she could say, "Let's chuck it, darling, and live in Florida."

She looked at the clock. Seven! And all's not well, she thought, her heart suddenly heavy.

"Hello," Larry said softly, as if not sure she was awake. "I sneaked in last night and didn't wake you. It was so late. And you were sleeping so soundly."

She raised up on her elbow. He looked so tired that a lump rose in her throat.

"Look, Larry, why were you so late?" she said. "What were you and O'Nara doing?"

"Oh, God, what a night!" Larry's voice was half-growl, half-groan. "Let me get my shower and I'll tell you about it."

She threw back the sheet, scrambled up, began brushing her hair while she waited. Presently Larry came back, his hair steamy, his face pink. He seemed to have forgotten that he was going to tell her something.

"After all, darling, I'm your wife, and a wife's got to have some attention, hasn't she?" she said, clasping her arms around his neck. "What's going on?"

Larry sat down on the side of the bed. It was always heavy going just before Captain Kennedy took over a job, he said. After all the strings had been neatly tied, Kennedy always claimed all the newspaper credit for solving whatever crime it happened to be. They expected it, he said. In the case of the Haddie murder, the captain had gone through the thing with exemplary tranquillity, but this second murder had changed things.

"In the first case," Larry explained, "the victim was on the point of becoming an English citizen by marrying an English captain, and the captain probably thought that wasn't too good. Anyhow, he got through it all right. And it didn't go too slow, on account of the Morrisons."

"Oh, darling, what did he say?"

"About Miss Haddie? God, he quoted Patrick Henry! But this new murder has him by the ears. Two killings! It was more than old Kennedy could stand."

"I suppose the old he-goat called you and O'Nara on the carpet?" Elva said, her heart sinking another few inches.

"And how! We've got twenty-four hours to clear the thing up. Or he will take charge. The sergeant said we'd have to say we were practically ready to make an arrest. Mrs. Douglas was our best bet, he said. That faint she staged when she learned the curator wasn't as bad as she thought was damning, O'Nara said. He got everything ready for the captain. Two or three pages of stuff. I'll bet my hide, shins and all, Kennedy was satisfied at first, thought it was okay."

"Oh, what happened?" Elva asked, brushing her hair vigorously.

"Well, O'Nara told the captain all about it. He laid it on a little thick, maybe. You always have to with Captain Kennedy, damn him. Anyhow, I thought Kennedy looked as pleased as Punch. I'll stake my last dime on it. Then he wanted to know who this Mrs. Douglas was. What was her first name, her husband's name, and

so on. When O'Nara told him he let out a howl of fury that bumped against the moon like radar. Only worse, maybe."

"Oh, goodness," said Elva, brushing frantically. "Why?"

"Because, my child, back about the time the bad lions were eating us poor Christians instead of turkey, the Kennedys and the Patricks were blood kin. He's a Kennedy, she's a Patrick—on her mother's side—and he says they're still kin. 'My relative!' he shrieked. 'My God, my relative and no more evidence than that! None of it's evidence, you nincompoops.' That's the word he used. Nincompoops."

"Oh, Lord," ejaculated Elva, and dropped her brush.

"Well, he's right, honey. We haven't any real, sewed-in-the-bag evidence against Mrs. Douglas. She never once threatened to do Sylvester bodily harm. So far as we know."

"What will O'Nara do now?"

"Oh, we're going to try drowning another duck. Going to take Williams around on his alibi trip this morning. Try to check it."

"Good heavens," said Elva, opening astonished eyes.

"Don't say you knew he didn't do it, please," Larry said in a hollow voice. "It'll be something to do until we find a better sacrificial goat."

"Oh, darling, I'm so sorry it's so blankety-blank," Elva said softly, full of sympathy. "It'll break soon. I know it will!"

Larry smiled. "What went on around here last night?"

"Miss Pilsbury, Mrs. Douglas and I sat around and talked, right after dinner," Elva said gently. She had never seen Larry look so downcast. "Mrs. Douglas's brother arrived from Philadelphia. She had phoned him, you know, and he came on the first train. They're going over to see Mr. Dixon this morning. He didn't want to see them. But they're going."

"Looks as if the Professor's in it to his chin!"

Elva told him then about going downstairs in the dark the night before to check the front door bolt and hearing somebody moving about on the third floor.

"I decided it was Williams, shutting his hall door, so went back to bed," she said. "But somebody was in the attic! Whoever it was bumped into something right over my bed!"

Well, Larry wanted to know, what was funny about that? They all had things stored in the attic, didn't they? Naturally, if you

went up at eleven or after you would be quiet about it, wouldn't you?

"So you don't think it might have been the murderer hiding the gun case key?" Elva said.

Larry groaned. "Sure you feel all right, Sherlock?" he said.

"Okay," said Elva. "Shall I try to see that Williams is called? Just in case he oversleeps and forgets about his date with the police?"

"I'll run up now and call him," said Larry. "I promised him I would. Feel sorry for the poor guy somehow."

No one was in the dining room when they went in to breakfast. Aggie, red-eyed as if she had been weeping, served them hot biscuits with bacon and eggs and strong coffee.

"It's just like I say to my Frank, I'm getting afraid of my shadow," Aggie said. "Frank says none of us need be surprised if we get our throats slit!"

Elva left it to Larry to console Aggie. She was thinking of the attic. She was thinking that Miss Pilsbury would do her kitchen buying about nine-thirty or ten, Williams would be out, Mrs. Douglas would be across the street, Dr. Young would be making sick calls. She and Aggie would be alone in the house, unless Joey came in. And Joey wouldn't matter. She would have no difficulty in reaching the attic unseen . . .

"Look, honey, you're not up to something, are you?" said Larry when he kissed her goodbye at the door. "Tell us, like a good girl!"

"Routine, my dear Watson," she said, smiling brightly. "Just routine . . ."

By ten-fifteen Elva was alone in the house. Aggie had left, too. She went with Miss Pilsbury to the neighborhood grocery to help bring back the groceries.

Elva dashed up immediately to the attic door, which opened off Verne Williams' small entrance hall, went in and shut the door carefully behind her. The narrow room ran the full width of the house, with a little jog in the east corner over her own room. There was a double dormer window in the south side, which let a fat slab of bright sunlight fall over the half-dozen or so trunks that were pushed up neatly against the wall. Last night, when she heard the sound above her room, she had not been able to recall what was

in the corner, but now she saw it was that old-fashioned walnut wardrobe that Miss Pilsbury had spoken of when she and Larry moved in. It was a cedar-lined wardrobe, Miss Pilsbury had said, and there was plenty of room in it for extra suits or dresses.

Elva tiptoed over to the wardrobe and for a moment stood gazing at its closed doors. Then, being a policeman's wife, and knowing that she must not leave new fingerprints or disturb the old ones, she took her handkerchief out of her smock pocket and carefully opened the doors.

The wardrobe, with its back against the north wall, faced the bright light from the dormer windows. Only a few garments hung from the long rod. Three or four winter dresses. A man's brown suit—Dr. Young's, she remembered—and a man's light tan raincoat. The raincoat belonged to Verne Williams. She had seen him wear it often during the early spring rains.

She pushed the dresses to the end of the rod, one at a time. Then she moved Dr. Young's suit back against the dresses. And now she almost stopped breathing. On the left cuff of Williams' raincoat were some large, ugly brown stains . . . *Blood?* Of course . . . Miss Haddie's blood, probably . . .

Suddenly she wanted to get out of the attic quickly. Out of the attic and out of the house, she wanted to run and not stop until she reached the street. With trembling fingers, she shoved Dr. Young's suit, and the dresses, back into place. Shutting the wardrobe doors carefully, she turned to run. But stopped short. Footsteps were rapidly mounting the third-floor stairs. She leaped blindly across ten feet of floor space to her trunk, raised the trunk lid.

The footsteps stopped. Somebody was listening at the door.

Fumbling in the trunk, she lifted an old winter dress. She was trying to shake the folds out when the hall door began to swing open slowly.

The movement of the door, which was slow, eased to a stop and a face peeped around the door's edge. The face belonged to Verne Williams.

"Oh, it's you, Elva?" he said in hollow tones. "Lost something?"

"N-n-no," quavered Elva. She was trying to pray and watch him, too. The only prayer she could think of was, *He leadeth me beside still waters* . . . "H-h-have to look for moths," she said.

"That's what that diabolical smell is, isn't it?" he said. "Damn moth balls! When I came in downstairs I thought nobody was here, everything seemed so shut up. Then I heard you in here and thought I'd better investigate."

"Trunk lid," said Elva, her voice little better than a squeak. "I'm through now."

She put the lid down. Lifting her chin, she began walking toward the door. She had to do something. She couldn't stand there by the trunk all day. Williams opened the door wider, as if she might pass. He was staring at her with an undisguised appraising look. She tried to meet the look with a smile. Williams moved back a little.

"My God, Elva," he cried in tones more hollow than ever. "you are afraid of me!"

"N-n-no," she said, flattening her body against the part of the door farthest from him. "Don't be silly."

"I've been bullied this morning until I'm not myself," he said bitterly. "It's perfectly foul, the whole thing. I say—"

She had been edging over the narrow space that lay between the door and the newel post at the top of the stairs. As Williams paused, watching her as if fascinated, she threw herself on the banister rail and went sliding triumphantly down to the second-floor hall.

She walked sedately down the lower stairs. Mrs. Douglas and her brother were coming in through the front door as she reached the entrance hall, and Mrs. Douglas, dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief, said, "Hello, Elva. I saw Mr. Dixon—but I can't tell you about it now." From the kitchen came the sound of voices, which meant that Miss Pillsbury and Aggie were back with the groceries. Suddenly everything seemed normal again, the air coming in through the screen door was hot and sweet. She went out on the small front porch and sat down on Miss Pillsbury's white bench, still shaky, and a little angry with herself.

The door opened and Williams came out. He walked firmly over and sat down beside her.

"Elva Moore," he said in a low voice, "you are frightened to death, aren't you?"

She was looking across the sunny street toward Freda's house and as she looked Joey came out and started to weed Freda's coreopsis

bed. Mr. Dixon was there in Freda's house, even if she could not see him. And cars were passing lazily along the street. There was nothing to be afraid of out here . . .

"My dear girl," Williams said, "you are still frightened! You almost fainted when I opened the door into the attic. Now, don't tell me what it is if you don't want to. But you seem to be afraid of me. And that's devilish depressing. Especially after the foul morning I've had!"

"What happened?" she said, finding her voice, her fear dropping away.

"I've said right along that O'Nara's an ass. He'll ruin Larry, too, if you don't put the damper on occasionally. I know something crazy is going on here and maybe I won't drop the dust of this town off my feet when it's cleared up! But I'm no more to blame than you are, Elva. Get that through your little head, will you? As to what happened to me this morning, I tried to retrace my steps for O'Nara after I left the Gallery Thursday night. With that damned ass asking a thousand questions, publicly, mind you, brow-beating me every step. God, it was foul!"

"I'm sorry," she said, looking down at Miss Pilsbury's larkspur that curved about the porch. Certainly he did not look like a murderer. But then, who did? "I suppose I am frightened. Out of my seven senses, as the professor says."

"That means you've given up the idea that a tramp did it?"

"Well, yes . . . If I ever had that idea about Mr. Sylvester's death. It does seem a little silly, doesn't it? What do you think, Verne?"

"I came down partly to tell you something," he said. "But you were so pale and shaky. Mrs. Morrison has repudiated her confession. She says she did not kill Gwendoline Haddie."

"Oh," Elva said slowly. "You mean . . ."

"Just that, my child. Says she made a phony confession. Andy Beavers, one of the best criminal lawyers in New York, is here to defend her. He had her retract, I suppose."

"Nearly everybody thinks she confessed to save her husband," Elva said. "Oh, I must run in and tell the news to the others!"

When she reached the hall she heard a murmur of voices coming from the dining room and hurried in there.

Mrs. Douglas and her brother were there, and Miss Pilsbury and

Aggie were passing crackers and cold drinks. Dr. Young came in from the kitchen with more ice.

"I beg your pardon," Elva said, "have you heard the news?"

They all gazed at her in mournful silence.

"Mrs. Morrison," she said, and noted, parenthetically, that her voice squeaked, "has repudiated her confession. She says she did not kill Gwendoline Haddie."

Mrs. Douglas quietly fainted.

Old Harry himself seemed to be loose, Elva thought. Everybody in the Pilsbury house appeared to have about reached the end of his tether. Even Dr. Young, usually so calm, seemed fired with suppressed excitement. Clearly, all were bewildered, dazed. They kept wandering aimlessly about, upstairs and down. Finally Miss Pilsbury said, "It's early for lunch, I know, but let's all sit down in the dining room and have Aggie bring in the leftover roast and some bread. We can make sandwiches at the table. Aggie has the frozen pudding ready."

"Splendid idea," said Dr. Young. "Food will help. Then I've got to run along to the hospital."

Mrs. Douglas pressed her long fingers against her reddened eyes, sighed dismally. "How can I eat?" she said with fretful exasperation. "They won't let Lena out of jail, I suppose, even if she has repudiated her confession. But if they should let her out, O'Nara will probably arrest me. All this and the wretched state of my nerves! Oh, dear, I've even forgotten what I was doing last night! The first night, I mean—Monday night. Does anybody remember what I was doing? Really, I honestly thought Sylvester killed Gwendoline. I told you so, didn't I, Patricia, dear? You remember, don't you, dear?"

"Stop it, Christabel," said her brother. "If you start talking like that, I'm going to leave. Stop it, right now!"

"I will, Henry, I will. I won't say another word."

"Come on to lunch, everybody," Miss Pilsbury said. As she pulled out her chair her hand was shaking, Elva noticed. *Mine's shaking, too*, thought Elva. "After lunch, Henry," Miss Pilsbury said, "I want you to take a walk downtown. Maybe Dr. Young will drive you and Mr. Williams down when he goes? You both need to get out of the house for a little while. Men can't stand being shut up like this."

Neither can I bear it, thought Elva. They all bore it, however,

for almost an hour. They made their sandwiches, some spread with thin slices of beef roast, some with thick peanut butter; there was a salad of crisp lettuce and tomatoes, and the frozen pudding, as thick with eggs and cream as custard.

Then Elva went back to the porch bench. Usually she enjoyed the laughter of the children playing up the side street. But now their laughter and shouts struck her as an unpleasant noise. Right now, she thought, I want my father, I want him more than anything; I don't want to write stories or look in attics . . .

Everything, she thought dismally, seemed so calm and peaceful. Off somewhere a bell struck the hour. Homey and peaceful . . . as if nothing were present to disturb or terrify. She went up to her room and got a library book, went stiffly down the stairs and on to the kitchen.

Aggie said she had persuaded Miss Pillsbury to go out to the garden to loosen the soil around the perennials. "It's like I said to Frank last night, Miss Elva, that poor Mrs. Douglas is hanging on her neck like a millstone, and I don't know what's going to happen to us all!"

Then Aggie took a good look at Elva.

"My stars," she said, "you're so white, Miss Elva, your rouge stands out like two holes in your cheeks! What's happened to you?"

Elva said nothing had happened, and rubbed her cheeks with her plump little fingers. She was taking a book back to the library across the street, she said . . .

She went into Freda's house, instead, and found Mr. Dixon at lunch in the breakfast room. She sat down, asked Joey for a cup of hot tea, and when he went back to the kitchen, she said what she had come to say.

"I know who the murderer's . . ."

For a full minute Mr. Dixon sat stark still, staring at her.

"Explain, please," he said. "Who? And why?"

She told him the story of her trip to the attic. Her underlip began to tremble. "It's his raincoat, and it has blood on it. He wore it that night he killed Miss Haddie—there was some blood, you know. And he hid it in the attic. He went in there last night. Probably to see if it was still unnoticed, or, better still, to put the gun case key in one of the pockets." She bit her teeth down over her lip for a moment. "I thought when I saw him standing there, and we were alone in the house, that he would kill me."

Mr. Dixon looked up at the ceiling with a hard angry look in his eyes.

"He's not there now," Elva said. "He went off with Dr. Young and Mr. Webb. And Larry and I liked him terribly!"

"Oh, so Dr. Young was there, too?" said Mr. Dixon gently. "Tell me everything that happened after you came downstairs."

"Well, Mrs. Douglas fainted again when she heard that Mrs. Morrison had repudiated her confession." Elva dabbed at her lips with her handkerchief. "She shouldn't have fainted, should she, Totem?"

Mr. Dixon reached over and patted her hand. "My dear, I ask you, I beg you, to be as calm as possible for just a little while longer. You are jittery. You have the storyteller's imagination, which is a little different from a detective's imagination. One is cold, like ice. The other is warm, like a flame."

"I don't care anything about imagination right now," she said. "What shall we do about the raincoat, Professor?"

"You take care of yourself, my dear," said Mr. Dixon. "Don't tell anybody about the raincoat. I'll take care of that. We're nearing the end of the mystery, Elva, and there must be no more murders, no more crime. Don't permit yourself to be alone with anybody—and I mean *anybody*—until the whole thing's in the open."

Something struck Elva suddenly. There had been something odd about Joey, a strange something . . . She raised her eyes slowly until they met Mr. Dixon's eyes.

"Joey?" she half-whispered. "What's the matter with Joey?"

Mr. Dixon's answering smile was half a sigh. "I believe he has remembered now where the ash shaker was. I felt certain he would remember. According to Helmholtz, there are three definite stages of thought, and my own idea is that memory acts in the same way, is a part of thought, naturally. First is the thing itself that slips by half-noticed. Then the effort to remember, which may be called the 'incubation' period. Then the final stage, or the 'illumination.' I think Joey has reached that final stage. I think he remembers."

"But if he hasn't told you? . . ."

"He's probably working it out in his own mind. He hasn't been over to do his dusting, has he?"

"I think not. I heard Aggie grumbling about it." She reached for

her book. "Williams always pretended to be so kind to him. Used to get him to play the harpsichord every time Miss Haddie went out of the house. Maybe he was doing it purposely to make Miss Haddie and Joey quarrel—so Joey would be blamed later when he killed her!"

"Is there a downstairs coat closet, where umbrellas, coats and such things are kept?" said Mr. Dixon.

"Yes," said Elva. "It's under the stairs, on the right as you go in. Verne kept the raincoat in there. I've seen it."

"So anybody could have slipped it on before going into the garden?"

"No," she said. "I mean, how did it get to the attic? And nobody came down the stairs last night. I—I think I would have heard them. And he came in this afternoon to check me!"

"I'll see Larry," said Mr. Dixon. "First, I must go downtown and look up one little thing. Then I'll see him."

Elva returned her book. She didn't want to stop at the library, but neither did she want to go home. So she walked about aimlessly, around first one block and then another, innocently trying to get rid of terror. While her legs briskly carried her body along the streets, her mind was back by her trunk in the attic, she was shaking that old winter dress and watching the hall door slowly open, with Verne Williams' pale face showing through the opening.

When her legs brought her once more to the library corner, she crossed the street and came toward the Pilsbury house. When she went in she could hear Aggie moving about in the kitchen. She went through the butler's pantry and found Aggie washing vegetables by the window.

"Oh, it's you, Miss Elva?" Aggie said, and held up a large butcher knife. "I keep it handy when I'm here alone. Mr. Larry said to tell you he'd been here and couldn't wait. Said for you to go to a movie, said Rosalind Russell was over here at the neighborhood. And said he'd be late."

"Oh, damn," Elva said. "Why didn't he wait!"

"Oh, you ain't heard, have you?" said Aggie. "Well, poor Mrs. Morrison wanted Mrs. Douglas and Miss Pilsbury to come to see her and Mr. Larry come to fetch 'em. They didn't want to go. At

least, Mrs. Douglas didn't. Miss Pilsbury didn't seem to mind."

"I'm glad they went," Elva said emphatically.

"Now, what I want to know," said Aggie, "where is that Joey? Does he think I'm going to do his work forever and let him get his wages? It's like I said to Frank, Miss Pilsbury spoils him!"

Aggie went to the street window and looked out guardedly. But she would see nothing in the street, Elva knew.

"While I was sweeping the front walk," Aggie said, dropping her voice, "Mrs. Douglas said she'd go across to Miss Freda's house and ask Joey why he didn't come to do his dusting. Mr. Dixon had gone and both doors were locked. Nobody answered the bell. She knocked, too. Miss Elva, I was sweeping, like I say, and I saw Miss Freda's attic curtains move. And I could see something behind the curtains, too. It was Joey! I told Miss Pilsbury he was hiding up in Miss Freda's attic, but she said it was probably the professor's cat. But the professor's cat ain't *black*!"

Elva went back to the porch and sat down. There was no sign of Joey in the house across the street. But walking down the street toward her were Mr. Webb and Verne Williams. They came on down the block, up the path between the barberries, up the steps. Mr. Webb went on into the house, but Williams stopped. She felt like ice as he sat down beside her.

"There's that fellow again, Elva," Williams said, half under his breath. "My God, I wonder what's up!"

Elva turned her head sharply. Standing on the corner, under the shade of Miss Pilsbury's young dogwood tree, was Policeman Peterson. She had not seen him come up. But there he was.

IT DID NOT TAKE Mr. Dixon long that afternoon to gather the data that he needed at the Town Clerk's office. This accomplished, he knew the end of the mystery was near. This gathering together of the threads, and making visible the whole of the design, was the

part he hated; it gave him a scratchy feeling of nausea. The end was near, yes, but there were several things yet to be done.

His next step was to talk to Sergeant O'Nara and Larry but he turned his battered roadster to the terraced streets first, and rode along where the bridal wreath and the pink wild roses still bloomed. The bridal wreath blossoms were dying, they were powdering the grass on the sloping edges of the terraces with petals that lay in little heaps like snow . . .

Finally he came back to O'Nara's office, for certain and definite things had to be done, and they had to be done his way, and after that O'Nara could finish the job.

He expected the atmosphere in O'Nara's office to be somewhat frigid. He was not disappointed. Obviously, O'Nara had steeled himself to follow his own line.

"The way I look at it, Professor, is you've got some crazy idea you want us to put over," O'Nara said. "I might as well tell you, so as not to waste time—nothing doing!"

"Oh," said Mr. Dixon with boyish naïveté, "then you are ready to arrest the murderer? Good! Splendid!"

O'Nara looked affronted.

"We have one of the murderers," he said coldly. "Mrs. Morrison's repudiation of her confession doesn't wash with us, Professor. We're checking everything, of course. It'll be for a jury to decide. We'll get the Sylvester murderer soon. I think I know who did it, all right. We're expecting something to break any time now."

"You might invite me to sit down," said Mr. Dixon mildly.

"Okay," O'Nara said, smiling. "Come down off the ceiling and sit down, Professor."

O'Nara yelled through the half-opened door to Larry in the back room.

"The professor's here—bring Moriarty in. The professor likes cats, remember? You'll both want to hear what he has to say."

Larry, obviously embarrassed, came in without Moriarty and sat down. Mr. Dixon, gazing at the ceiling, never looked more innocent.

"Anyway," O'Nara said, "I'm goldarned mad about something! All that business about Mrs. Morrison's wanting to see her friends was a publicity stunt. All the reporters in town, with their camera men, were on hand. Who tipped them off, Professor?"

"Andy Beavers, of course," said Mr. Dixon calmly. "He's convinced of her innocence. What nicer for the Sunday papers than pictures of her good neighbors calling at the jail to stand by? Preparing public opinion, of course."

"I wasn't born yesterday. I knew the object, all right," said O'Nara. "Just wanted to know the brains behind it. What is it you want anyway, Professor? I'm a busy man, strange as it may seem to you."

"I know you are busy, Sergeant. And for all your bluster, I know you're as anxious to see justice done as I could possibly be. I know you don't want a woman who, in a moment of hysteria, confessed a crime she didn't commit, to be punished for that crime."

"Go on," groaned O'Nara. "I love it. Eating it like candy. Listen, Professor. If you know something we don't know, spill it. Remember there's such a thing as being an accessory after the fact, in law. I'd hate to see anything happen to you, Professor Dixon."

"I'm sure you would. As a matter of fact, I've come to tell you something. I'm trying to help you and Larry. Now, I think I know who the murder is, but common decency won't permit me to say who it is without more proof than I possess at this moment. I might possibly be mistaken."

"Oh, so that's how it is?" said O'Nara harshly. "Must be a very uncomfortable feeling, Professor!"

"For heaven's sake, Sergeant, let the professor say what he wants to say," exploded Larry. "You know damn well he knows what he's doing!"

"Okay, okay," O'Nara said. For some odd reason he looked relieved. "Let's have it, Professor. You've come to tell us something. What is it?"

Mr. Dixon took out his pipe, set it between his teeth cold, and began to talk. He told them about Elva's discovery of the raincoat in the attic wardrobe, with the rusty brown stains on the left cuff.

"She recognized the coat," said Mr. Dixon. "It belongs to Verne Williams."

"Well, damn his hide!" exclaimed Larry. "She heard him in the attic last night and told me this morning. I'm certainly a dope! Think I'll go in the plumbing business!"

"I've never trusted that painter for a second," said the sergeant bitterly. "He's in it to his neck!"

"Maybe," said Mr. Dixon tranquilly. "We must consider the facts carefully. The coat was hanging in the downstairs closet. Williams could have worn it, of course. So could Dr. Young. Or Miss Pilsbury. Or Mrs. Douglas. Even Aggie could have borrowed it for the few minutes necessary to commit the deed."

"Yes, of course," said the sergeant heavily. "Joey or the Morrisons couldn't have done so. What a damned case! Or two, maybe. We'll have to have the stains analyzed at once. I'll send out and get the coat immediately."

"No, wait," said Mr. Dixon. "No attempt will be made to destroy the coat now. There being no furnace fires right now that would be rather difficult. I'd like to spring the coat later."

"Well, I think Williams wore the coat himself," said O'Nara grimly. "I've always believed that Miss Haddie kept the appointment with him and he followed her out. What else is on your mind, Professor?"

"I want you," said Mr. Dixon flatly, "to call a meeting of the suspects for tonight. At the same hour and in the same place that you had them on last Monday night. Unless I phone you within thirty minutes after I leave here and tell you not to."

"Why that thirty minutes, Professor?"

"I have one more thing to do, which I couldn't do earlier, and which could conceivably change my plans. But I don't think it will."

"It's a big order," said O'Nara slowly. "If something really significant doesn't come out of that meeting it would probably cost me the promotion I'm hoping for. Somebody's going to be lieutenant in Crumble's place. Kennedy has received word that Crumble won't be able to take his old job again. Larry and I are both hoping to step up, Professor. I'd hate like hell to jeopardize our jobs."

"You won't jeopardize them. Give me the chance tonight. Eleven o'clock, wasn't it? I'm pretty sure I'll get results. It will, I hope, give you just what you're looking for, plus the promotion."

"You have to do things your own way, I suppose, Professor. Okay. We'll do it."

All three men looked at their watches.

"If I have not telephoned you by five-thirty, call the meeting," said Mr. Dixon. "Have everybody there. Mrs. Morrison, Mr. Morrison. Dr. Young and the two ladies at the Pilsbury house. I'll bring Joey with me. Verne Williams, of course. You two. And Elva.

I'm going to try very hard to give you a *bona fide* confession this time, with proof. Oh, yes—put a policeman on the Pilsbury lawn at once."

Without another word, Mr. Dixon got up and went out to the street, climbed into his ramshackle roadster and turned its nose in the direction of that part of the city where dwelled the *nouveau riche*.

There were no terraces on Cresthill Boulevard; the boulevard lay like a wide ribbon on the top of a gentle slope, where deep vistas between the widely-spaced houses gave enchanting glimpses of the great river, now blue and dark from a tugboat's smoke. The houses, four to a block, were of brick or stone, with tile roofs, and were set far back from the handsome boulevard, and as Mr. Dixon drove along the street northward the slanting rays of the sun picked out the Sylvester number.

The maid who took Mr. Dixon's name at the door, said, "Upstairs, please."

There were people sitting stiffly in the drawing room downstairs; you could hear the low murmur of their voices on the stairs, and a yellow cat was sleeping in the upper hall under a window. Mr. Dixon stooped and lifted the cat.

He was standing at a window in a small sitting room, with the cat on his shoulder, when Mrs. Sylvester entered the room.

She was slim, with tawny hair that rolled back from a low forehead and fell in a page-boy bob. Her eyes were rusty brown and her white skin was colorless except for her pretty red mouth. There was something about her that made him think of Gwendoline Haddie as Gwendoline had looked when she was at Oakwood.

"Mr. Dixon?" she said in a husky voice. "I am Rita Sylvester. It was good of you to come. Oh, you have Tabitha's kitten, haven't you? I'd forgotten. Won't you sit down? Mr. Brown told me you were here and I asked him to call you for me. You see, I read about that New Orleans case you helped solve. Please, what can I do to help you find the murderer of my husband?"

Mr. Dixon thanked her and sat down, the yellow cat on his knee.

"I must ask the old routine question about enemies, Mrs. Sylvester," he said gently. "Obviously, Mr. Sylvester had one enemy

at least. We must find that person. Now the question is, was he aware of having an enemy?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, no, I don't think so. As I told Sergeant O'Nara, I don't think my husband dreamed that anybody hated him!"

"All right. Are there any old letters that might give us a hint of something that he might even have forgotten?"

"No. There are no letters. I've searched carefully. Mr. Brown has searched just as carefully at the Gallery. He said there were none there."

"Did you find anything at all? Any old photographs, say?"

"Well, yes. There are a dozen or so old ones. But he'd told me about them some time ago. As a very young man, Mr. Dixon, he was very popular. Still, as I told Sergeant O'Nara, there's nothing at all in anything he ever said to me, or in anything I can find now, to indicate that anybody was especially jealous of him. The photographs, of course, are all old."

She got up and went to a combination bookcase and writing desk and brought back a square cardboard box.

"I had these out to show Mr. O'Nara," she said. "He said they were of no importance. He thinks they will soon break the case. Do you believe that, Mr. Dixon?"

"I think it is quite possible, Mrs. Sylvester."

"Really, Mr. Dixon, my husband had not gone with anyone regularly for several years before he met me. As I said, when he was younger, he was gay and popular. I've heard a lot about that. I think women ran after him frightfully. And some of them wrote silly things on their pictures. But there's nothing in all that, I am sure."

Mr. Dixon looked over the photographs, examining them carefully. Presently he turned one over. On the back was written, in ink already faded, "To my darling."

He laid the photographs on the end table beside his chair, put Tabitha on the floor, stood up.

"You have my deepest sympathy, Mrs. Sylvester," he said formally.

"Thank you, Mr. Dixon. Help us, if you can. I want the murderer punished!"

"Yes," he said.

She was young and pretty and very vain, he thought. But she looked as if she had suffered.

"The police," he said, "will probably arrest the murderer very soon now . . ."

He took leave of Mrs. Sylvester, went back to his roadster. At the first corner he turned and rode slowly along until he had passed the business section of the town. Then he nosed his car west, to the streets where the flowers were. Already the bridal wreath petals had fallen, were gone, "like snow in the night," but the wild roses on the terraces were bursting into bloom.

Soon the thing would be over and he could smoke his pipe in peace, he could start writing on his book again, that chapter on "Characterization" . . . There was yellow in the sky again and the air was sticky. This was a long June day . . . like another day when he had helped little Roberta Morrison fly her kite . . . They had stood with their backs against the sun, and the kite, roundish and bright yellow, had hung like a golden moon against the silvery sky . . . He thought of that anonymous telephone call he had received earlier in the week, that 'What about the child?' He hoped that the voice would never blurt out the truth about Gwendoline and little Roberta. For Roberta's sake . . .

The time would drag interminably if he went back to Freda's house now. Besides, somebody from across the street would be sure to come to talk with him; and he didn't want to talk with anybody. Dinner at Wisner's, and a newsreel afterwards, would shorten the time . . .

After dinner he sat in Wisner's lobby until nine-fifteen. He got up to go to the newsreel but stopped at the telephone booth and phoned Joey.

Finally a squeaky voice answered. Joey said he almost didn't answer the phone. And he had all the doors locked.

"You said for me to stay right here, didn't you, Mist' Dixon?"

"Yes. Of course. Why?"

"Somebody done telephone me twice. Said I was to go over to the Gallery an' clean up them boxes in the back."

"Did you recognize the voice?"

"Sounded like a ghost whisperin'," said Joey. "An' it hung up, right in my ear. I reckon I'll have to go back down to Mississippi an' over to Vicksburg."

"I'll get my car and be out within fifteen minutes. It's pretty dark now, so stay right where you are until I get there. And don't open the door to anybody."

"Yassir. The kitten an' me are goin' to sit right here," said Joey. "I can see Mist' Peterson by the street light. He's sittin' on the steps across the street. I guess I kinda like Mist' Peterson . . ."

23

INSIDE THE PILSBURY HOUSE, lights shone through the windows of all the rooms but the two that had belonged to Gwendoline Haddie and Elida. These rooms remained as dark as two graves.

By five minutes to eleven all the members of the two households were there in the Pilsbury dining room. They came in and took their seats in heavy silence. As it was to be a sort of reconstruction scene, Elva had been asked to bring her notebook. She recorded the names again: Dr. Young. Miss Pilsbury. Mrs. Douglas. Verne Williams. Mr. Morrison and Mrs. Morrison, accompanied by Mr. Beavers. Joey. Larry, Sergeant O'Nara and Mr. Dixon.

She wrote, in parentheses, "Miss Pilsbury has her knitting. Joey is trembling like a bowl of jelly. The lace cloth is on the dining table again, the same as it was on Monday night. But there are no flowers. Everybody looks guilty. Everybody but Dr. Young. He looks angry. Well, they can't all be guilty, can they?"

The hall clock struck eleven and O'Nara began talking.

"There will be one or two things different tonight from what it was at our meeting on Monday night," he said. "Mr. Beavers, who is an attorney, wished to accompany his client, Mrs. Morrison. Mr. Dixon, Mr. Williams and Larry Moore were not here on Monday but they were holding a similar meeting across the street. We are merely consolidating these two meetings tonight.

"There is another thing that's different, too. Mr. Sylvester was here Monday night. Mr. Sylvester is not here tonight. And you know why . . . I've asked Mr. Dixon to take charge of this meet-

ing tonight. The transcripts of our Monday evening questions are here to guide him."

Mr. Dixon shifted his long legs and stood up. His face, Elva thought, looked heavy and sad.

"We believe," he said, "that there is no doubt that the Haddie and Sylvester murders are connected. Two murders, but one murderer. We also believe that a third murder was planned— We believe, too, that the murderer is present now in this room. Those of you who are innocent, know your innocence. But what you may not realize is that so long as the guilty person is not exposed there rests upon each of you the *onus probandi*, the burden of proof."

"Speaking for my client, Mrs. Morrison," said Andy Beavers. "I take it you mean that each person present should now tell what he knows about these two cases, or even what he strongly suspects?"

"Yes. Let him explain his own actions, if they need explaining. If he suspects another, let him say so and tell why. Mrs. Morrison, perhaps you will tell first why you confessed to the murder of your cousin and now repudiate that confession?"

Mrs. Morrison clasped and unclasped her slim fingers and looked at Mr. Beavers, who nodded.

"I made a false confession on an impulse to help my husband," she said in a low voice. "I knew he was innocent, but I became afraid when the circumstances seemed drawing in on him. I was very foolish. And I am very sorry."

"Then you did not kill your cousin, Gwendoline Haddie?"

"Oh, no, no! And I suspect nobody at all. Nobody." She turned toward her husband. He did not meet her gaze but reached out and put his hand over her nervously twisting fingers.

Mr. Dixon turned to Williams.

"Mr. Williams, you own a tan raincoat, I believe?"

Williams half-started from his chair in surprise.

"Well, my God, yes," he answered. "Is it a crime to own a tan raincoat? If it is a lot of people are criminals!"

"Where is the raincoat, Mr. Williams?"

"Now, look, Professor, don't you try to bully me too," Williams exclaimed. "So far as I know the coat's in the closet under the stairs. Anyhow, what in the devil are you driving at?"

"Mr. Williams, did you wear the coat on Monday night? It rained very hard for about twenty minutes, remember? Did you

follow Miss Haddie into the garden and crush her skull with the broken ash shaker? And get stains of blood on your cuff? And at the first opportunity, hide the coat in that walnut wardrobe in the attic behind your apartment? Because you had, for the moment, no other way of disposing of it? And later, when you had the opportunity, did you kill Mr. Sylvester in his Gallery office?"

"You know damn well I didn't," said Williams hoarsely, going red and white by turns. "I didn't kill either one. I didn't wear my coat Monday night. I waited in my studio that night for Miss Haddie. I thought she would come up by nine or nine-thirty, although I didn't pay much attention to the time. I was reading Aristotle and I didn't care. When I finally went out—as you well know—the rain had stopped. If anything's been done to my raincoat, somebody else did it."

Williams was standing now, like a man pushed up against a wall.

"Look, Professor," he said, his voice suddenly pleading. "Elva says you base everything on motive. Not where raincoats are. Well, for God's sake, why don't you go into that little matter? Motive?"

"Yes," said Miss Pilsbury quickly. "That's right, Professor. I thought in the beginning that it was a tramp, with robbery as the motive."

"We all know," said Mr. Dixon quietly, as if he were conducting a class, "that money, or gain, is said to be at the root of most murders. But there is also plenty of evidence, going back thousands of years, that the motive for most murders has been hate, plus a desire for revenge. Er—why did Samson pull down the temple to kill? Even though it destroyed himself? Revenge was his motive. First was his overpowering pride, then humiliation, then hate, then revenge and death!"

"Well, that rules me out," said Williams, sitting down again. "I neither hate nor crave revenge."

"Let's come back to the raincoat," Mr. Dixon said. "Did anyone notice the coat hanging in the closet? Earlier, I mean?"

"That closet is reserved for the guests," said Miss Pilsbury. "I remember telling Mr. Williams to hang his coat in there."

"Did you notice it at any time? And that it was missing?"

"I think I have seen it hanging there," she said slowly. "In the early spring. But I've not noticed it lately, I'm sure."

"All right. Let's dismiss the coat for a moment while I ask a simple question about this beautiful lace tablecloth.

"It's handmade Irish lace, isn't it? This cloth was on the table Monday night. It was put on *after dinner*. May I ask who put the cloth on?"

"I put it on," said Mrs. Douglas in a shaking voice. "I put it on tonight—we were told to let everything duplicate Monday night."

"All right. Let me tell you why this cloth was put on Monday night. It was because you who live in this house are models of neatness. But one of you is a little neater than the others. The important thing is that the lace cloth was put on Monday night because somebody in this room was expecting outsiders to come in.

"In short, somebody knew a murder was to be committed and strangers would probably come in. Everything must look splendid and neat. Were you expecting a murder to be committed Monday night, Mrs. Douglas?"

"Expecting—a murder?" stammered Mrs. Douglas, and collapsed down into the corners of the lovely old French armchair.

"Help her pull herself together, Dr. Young, please," Mr. Dixon said, and went on about the business in hand. "Now, Miss Pilsbury, you say you thought, in the beginning, that it was a tramp who killed Gwendoline Haddie. With robbery the motive. You spoke to me earlier about that theory, I believe. But I ask again, who would kill for a string of beads?"

"Yes, but you forget, Mr. Dixon, there was the diamond ring," she said quickly. "It was a two-carat diamond, and very beautiful. My theory was that the tramp got the necklace and was trying to get the diamond off Gwendoline's finger, but found it too tight, and was frightened away by a noise. Now that I know about the raincoat, of course . . ."

"My God, Miss Pilsbury, you don't think I did it, do you?" yelled Williams. "You couldn't possibly think that!"

"But you quarreled with her, Mr. Williams," she said coldly. "You quarreled with Gwendoline."

"Quarreled? With Miss Haddie? Never!" Williams looked beside himself, his face was purple. "What is this! I never had an unkind word with her! I swear—"

Mrs. Douglas's voice broke in on Williams. Elva looked up sharply for the voice was hardly recognizable as Mrs. Douglas's.

She was in a fury, and indignation apparently gave her vocal chords new strength.

"The one who quarreled with Gwendoline was you, Patricia," she cried shrilly. "You can't pin it on anybody else! And I put the lace cloth on the table Monday night because you told me to!"

"Don't believe her, she is lying," said Miss Pilsbury. While her words were clearly enunciated, her lips seemed hardly to move. "Christabel is always that way when she's hysterical."

"No," panted Mrs. Douglas. "No, Patricia. I'm telling the truth. You're trying to pin something on me and on Mr. Williams. You've always tried to be judge, jury and executioner. And you know it! One of the reasons I was trying to throw suspicion on Sylvester—may God forgive me—was I wanted to protect you, Patricia. I heard you quarreling in Elida's room. With Gwendoline. On Thursday of last week. I was lying down for my afternoon nap but I got up and slipped to the door for I couldn't imagine what was happening. We were alone in the house, remember. I heard the dreadful things you both said."

Her arms folded over the pile of knitting in her lap, Miss Pilsbury's fingers gently caressed a ball of white yarn.

"Of course I quarreled with Gwendoline when I found her in Elida's room," she said in a thin, scratchy voice. "Gwendoline said she was looking to see if Elida had kept any of her old letters. Naturally, I told her to get out of the room. And to stay out."

"Miss Pilsbury," said Mr. Dixon gravely, "will you tell us how you knew, with the autopsy report not yet made public, that somebody had tried to pull the diamond ring from Gwendoline's finger? Which was something only the police and the murderer could know?"

Miss Pilsbury pointed the ball of yarn at him. "I guessed it, of course," she said with emphasis. "That was easy enough. Wasn't it, Professor? After all, I have a brain I can use."

"Miss Pilsbury, the anniversary of your sister's death was Monday, June 16th, wasn't it? Do you always burn a light in her room on the anniversary of her death?"

She looked at him, confused, her lips trembling.

"Yes . . . As a small memorial to my darling."

Mr. Dixon glanced down at the typewritten sheet in his hand.

"Then you went up to the room on Monday night? But you did not mention it to Sergeant O'Nara, I see?"

"Perhaps I forgot it," she said. "I don't like to speak of my sister to strangers or outsiders. I went up, shut the windows, and put the light on."

"At what time?"

"While the others were at dinner. I had been lying down and had on my robe. So I used the rear stairs. Since I remodeled the house these go up from the pantry. I could go that way and not be seen."

"Was it you who left the door open—all night?"

"No," she said, with a ghastly face. "Gwendoline Haddie did it. She went in there before going to the garden. I might as well admit that I saw her. But I didn't speak to her. I had slipped up again to see if the hall window was shut. But I saw her and went back down to my room without speaking to her."

"So a light burned in Elida's room Monday night on the anniversary of her death? Yes . . . Why did it burn on Thursday night, too?" He looked down at her from his great height as he stood at the end of the table. "But you don't have to answer that question. We know why the light burned again on Thursday night. Wasn't it because on that night the debt was fully paid? Because Mr. Sylvester died that night?"

"I'm afraid—I don't know—what you mean, Mr. Dixon . . ."

He went on, remorselessly.

"On that night, Thursday, the guard would not be at the Gallery. Thursday is choir practice night. The person who had stolen the key of the gun case slipped into the Gallery through the rear door, that night, got the gun out of the case. And hid in the closet when Joey unexpectedly returned to finish a bit of dusting he'd forgotten to do earlier. This had happened once before, hadn't it, Joey?"

"Hidin' in the closet of room 14? Yassir. But first time I didn't suspicion somebody was tryin' to get into the gun case."

"When Joey left on Thursday night, this person came out of the closet, shot Mr. Sylvester as he sat at his desk, and slipped out of the Gallery by the rear door. Miss Pilsbury, your sister Elida was engaged to be married to Mr. Sylvester, wasn't she?"

"Yes," she said in an anguished voice, her fingers still caressing the ball of white yarn. "But that is ancient history."

"Gwendoline Haddie won your hatred first by robbing your sister of her sweetheart, didn't she? And Sylvester won it by breaking his engagement to your sister? And by refusing to return Elida's photograph, with its tender message on the back? You felt your sister's long illness—and ultimately her death—was caused by her unhappy love affair? When Sylvester married recently, and you returned to find Gwendoline in your home, you plotted the revenge that the hatred in your heart had cried for since your sister's death?"

"You cannot prove it," she said, wetting her lips. "You cannot prove anything so ridiculous!"

Mr. Dixon turned and spoke slowly and gently.

"Joey, where did you see the ash shaker after it disappeared from the garage?"

"It was—it was down in Miss Pilsbury's private store room in the basement," Joey mumbled, his eyes down. "I ain't supposed to go in there, but I couldn't find the oilcan for the lawnmower and I went lookin' an' the shaker was down there back of the door."

"And who was it that hid in the Gallery closet in room 14?"

Joey looked up at Mr. Dixon. He was beyond speech but he bobbed his head.

The Professor drew in a deep breath and turned back to Miss Pilsbury. His voice was still low and gentle.

"Will you tell us about your quarrel with Gwendoline Haddie, or would you rather Mrs. Douglas told us?"

In the sudden silence Elva looked up from her notes. Two bleak tears tumbled down her cheeks.

"Miss Pilsbury, you ought to have a lawyer," she said.

"Ask them to get a lawyer . . ."

"I don't want a lawyer. What I am saying is official, and I know it. I might as well tell about the quarrel, and about Elida, and get it over."

Miss Pilsbury's voice was deep and strange. The thin scratch quality was gone and in its place a note that was almost calm.

"I was ten years older than Elida. I had to be a mother to her,

too, from the time she was five . . . Those two killed her. She wasted away, after Gwendoline took Sylvester from her, until she died. 'I will try to eat, darling,' she would say. But she couldn't . . . Gwendoline was jealous of Lida's happiness, jealous of her beauty, too. Regardless of the vile things Gwendoline said to me in Elida's room that day, my sister was as good as she was beautiful. I never expected to repeat her words, but I suppose I must . . .

"She said my sister, who had been so carefully reared, had lived . . . with her fiancé, Sylvester. That many times when I thought she was with friends, she was with him. She taunted me . . . about the cause of Elida's long illness. After robbing Elida, she slandered her. So I knew she had to die. What better time for her to die than the anniversary of my darling's death? It was almost as if God had sent her to my hand. And if one had to die, why not both? . . .

"I might not have had the courage if I hadn't seen her go into Elida's room that night. So I followed her into the garden. I thought if I took the beads and the diamond, it would look as if a tramp had done it for robbery. But I couldn't get the ring off. Then I heard a noise and had to run . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"And the raincoat, Miss Pilsbury?" prompted O'Nara.

"Oh, I had the raincoat on. And a scarf. I hid the scarf under my mattress. As soon as I could I slipped up and put the coat in the attic wardrobe. The gun key is in the pocket. I took it up there—last night, wasn't it, Elva? I knew you were in the hall, listening. I'm glad you didn't come up, for I might have . . ."

"Oh, Patricia, don't," sobbed Mrs. Morrison. "You couldn't!"

"Let me finish, Lena. Afterwards, I thought perhaps Gwendoline had lied about Sylvester's seduction of my sister. When I went into his office I had the gun concealed in some magazines. I gave him a chance to deny it. He shrugged and said to let sleeping dogs lie. Then I saw it come over his face that he knew what was about to happen. I shot him before he could move."

"Don't believe her! She's out of her mind," sobbed Mrs. Morrison. "That's it—she's out of her mind!"

"Maybe I am, Lena," went on the controlled voice. "For a long time after Elida died I thought I was losing my mind. Yes, maybe I am, for I was planning to kill Joey too. I saw him come out of my store room that day. At first I thought he hadn't seen the

ash shaker. But when he began hiding from me, then I knew. Yes, I am crazy, Lena. Joey is a good boy and I was going to—"

She paused and looked up at Mr. Dixon.

"There were a lot of crazy things I was going to do. You know what I mean, Professor. It's all over now and—"

Mr. Dixon met her burning gaze and nodded. He turned away as O'Nara rose, and with only a quick glance at the circle of shocked faces, he left the room.

Crossing the street, Mr. Dixon sat down on the steps and waited. Almost immediately the thing he expected came. Sounds of commotion and shrill voices echoing across the lawn. After a few minutes, he saw Elva and Williams coming across the street toward him. He had not wanted to talk to anybody but he had felt certain they would come.

"I suppose you know what's happened, Professor," Elva said in a half-whisper. "She had something in that ball of yarn! And she swallowed it. Your face looks blank, but I'll bet you knew it."

"Young pounced on her, damn him, but I don't think he can save her," said Williams thoughtfully. "It would be the easiest way out for her."

After they had left, Mr. Dixon went in to the wing chair in Freda's living room. He got his pipe out, packed it down, lighted it. Suddenly he got up and went to the telephone. He gave the operator Freda's Boston number and after a short wait he heard Freda's sleepy voice saying, "Hello? Mrs. Nash speaking . . ."

"Er—um—Mr. Dixon speaking, Freda," he said, coughing a little. "Rather late to be calling, I'm afraid."

"Oh, Professor, how nice of you. Really, I had just gone to bed. Not ten minutes ago . . ."

Her voice seemed to hang in the air a moment.

"What's the matter, Totem?" she said. "Are you sick, or something?"

"Er—um—no, my dear, I'm quite all right," he said. And blew his nose. "I—er—are you well, my dear?"

"Totem, I couldn't be weller. Listen, darling, I know what's happened. That case is finished? You've had the denouement? And your heart is breaking."

"Yes. And the Morrisons are cleared. Absolutely, my dear. I knew you'd want to know. There's been a complete confession—"

"Oh . . ." said Freda. "Darling, I suppose you don't want to talk about it now. Or do you, Totem?"

"No. Not tonight, Freda. Just wanted to tell you about the Morrisons, so you could tell the others up there. And wanted to hear your voice. Good night, my dear."

"Good night, darling. And God bless you!"

Cradling the receiver, Mr. Dixon coughed a little and went back to his pipe. The kitten put a soft paw on the toe of his shoe. He picked up the sleepy little animal and put it across his knee. And felt immeasurably better . . .

THE END

GHOST OF A CHANCE

BY

KELLEY ROOS

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1

JEFF STRAIGHTENED UP AND STEPPED triumphantly back off the hearth. A chorus line of tiny flames danced up the side of the log, got a foothold and went to work. A moment later the fire was blazing cozily, our living room no longer resembled a three-sided bus station, and I stopped thinking about Miami, Florida.

"There's no place like New York in December," I said.

"December," my Aunt Ellie said and put down her crocheting.

Quickly Jeff said to me, "Haila, I wonder if I should go out and buy some more logs."

"You can't buy logs on Sunday," I said.

"Sunday," Aunt Ellie said and cleared her throat.

"Besides," I said rapidly, but not quite as frantically as Jeff, "you'd never get back. You'd perish."

The three of us looked through the back windows and watched the snow battle its way through the freezing wind to a resting place in our frozen garden. Each of us shuddered and turned gratefully back toward the fire. Jeff sat down on the love seat opposite Aunt Ellie's and mine. Aunt Ellie reached across the coffee table and patted his knee with her plump little hand. She smiled at him cozily and Jeff smiled back at her with all his might. She returned happily to her crocheting.

This was the beginning of Aunt Ellie's third week with us. For thirty years she had been saying, over and over again, that wild horses couldn't drag her to New York. But finally they had and it looked as if those wild horses had had enough of Aunt Ellie and had no intention of dragging her back to Terre Haute. I sympathized with them and I sympathized with Jeff. Aunt Ellie, from her fat little feet to the myriad of tight, bright brown and artificial curls that swamped her empty little head, was a one.

"Let's have a beer," Jeff suggested.

"Beer," Aunt Ellie said and, without the breath of a pause, she rushed on. "Never will I forget little Haila and the sip of beer."

Gently, so that I could give her my undivided attention, she confiscated the pencil I was using on a double-croctic puzzle. "Little Haila was six years old and she was spending a week at our house. Pinky Pinkham had just got married and he brought Bunny over to meet us. Of course, that called for a celebration. Well, Pinky gave Haila a sip of his beer. And you should have seen her face!" Aunt Ellie laughed and laughed; Jeff mechanically handed her his handkerchief and she expertly dried her tears of hilarity. "You should have seen that child's face! She couldn't swallow the beer and she was too well brought up to spit it out. So she just stood there!"

"What did she finally do with the beer?" Jeff asked, but Aunt Ellie was too convulsed to answer. "Haila, *what* did you finally do with the beer?"

"Nothing. It's still in my mouth."

"She just stood there!" Aunt Ellie giggled. "Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear! Jeffie, you don't know how lucky you are!"

"What?" Jeff inquired.

"To have married a girl like Haila."

"Yes," Jeff said. "I am lucky."

"Lucky," Aunt Ellie said. "Once Haila leaned too far out a window when she was five and . . ."

"Five," Jeff said. "When I was in high school our basket-ball team was going to play . . ."

"Play," Aunt Ellie said. "Never will I forget the first play that Haila ever . . ."

Jeff suddenly got up. "Excuse me."

"What is it, darling?"

"The phone, Haila."

"I didn't hear it."

Jeff went into the bedroom, closing the door after him. I sneaked my pencil out of Aunt Ellie's hand and went back to work on my puzzle. My Aunt was usually quiet when someone was temporarily out of the room; she didn't want anyone to miss anything she said. Occasionally she giggled and I knew she was lining up a list of side-splitting anecdotes of my childhood with which to beguile us. Jeff came back and walked slowly to the windows. He stood looking into the garden.

"Who was it?" I said.

"Frank Lorimer."

"Who's he?"

"I don't know," Jeff said. "Do you?"

"I've never heard the name."

"Lorimer," Aunt Ellie said and she said it twice more. "It strikes me there was a Lorimer at home years ago. Yes! He was the milkman. I never really knew his first name, but I always had the feeling it might be Frank. Isn't that strange?"

"Yes," I said. "Jeff, what did your Frank Lorimer want?"

"He wants me to help him. He says that a friend of his—a lady—is going to be murdered. Any minute."

"Jeff, did you say . . ."

"Murdered."

Aunt Ellie screamed.

Quickly, I turned my back on her; she never fainted unless someone was looking. "Jeff, tell me."

"Mr. Lorimer wants me to help keep his lady friend alive. He suggests that I come to the Belfast Bar on Thompson Street and talk to him about it. He seems to take for granted that I'm the type that likes ladies to stay alive."

"Why doesn't he go to the police?"

"Maybe he thinks Sunday is their day off."

"Maybe," I said. "Then again he might not like policemen. So many people you get mixed up with, darling, don't approve of policemen. And vice versa."

"Mr. Lorimer sounded like a respectable citizen."

"Respectable," Aunt Ellie said. "Then why doesn't he meet you at his home? Instead of a bar? On Sunday."

"I don't know that," Jeff said. "Perhaps he doesn't have a home."

"Poor man," Aunt Ellie said. "Homeless."

"Jeff," I said, "why did he call you for help?"

"He believes all that stuff he read about me in the newspaper last week. You know, that I solved six murders which baffled the best police minds in the city, solved them single-handed while simultaneously practicing my hobby of earning a living being a photographer, whipping up exotic curries in my streamlined kitchen and munching an apple. . . . And it is with regret, Aunt Ellie, that I must leave you now."

"Jeff," I said, "I'm going to the Belfast Bar with you."

"You stay here with Aunt Ellie."

"No, you need me more than she does. Aunt Ellie, a woman's place is at her husband's side, isn't it?"

"I often say that," Aunt Ellie said. "But in this case . . ."

"Jeff, what do we do exactly?"

"Have a drink at the bar. Mr. Lorimer saw that picture of me in the paper. He says he'll recognize me. He'll join us there."

"With his lady friend?"

"He didn't specify that."

Aunt Ellie said, "You're going to leave me alone here? Alone in this apartment? With a murderer loose in New York?"

"You'll be safer here, dear," I said.

Aunt Ellie screamed again.

"My God!" Jeff said.

"I thought I saw something moving! In the corner there. But it seems to be gone now. Well," Aunt Ellie said and sighed resignedly. Her resignation was a work of art, early primitive. "You two just run along. I'll manage somehow, although I don't know how. And give my regards to Frank Lorimer. Frank Lorimer, of all people!"

"This can't be your Frank Lorimer, dear."

"You just ask him if he ever had a milk route in Terre Haute. No, come to think of it, his name wasn't Lorimer. It was Frank Lanson. Jeffie, are you sure the man on the phone didn't say he was Frank Lanson? I'd like to see Frank again."

"Lorimer," Jeff said. "Lorimer." He helped me into my coat, then dutifully kissed Aunt Ellie. "Good-bye, we won't be any longer than necessary. And I hope for Frank's lady's sake it won't be necessary to be long at all."

"Good-bye," Aunt Ellie said. "Don't worry about me. Just forget about me, that I'm sitting here. Alone. In fear and trembling. I'll be all right."

"Now, Aunt Ellie . . ."

"Come on, Haila," Jeff said.

"Haila," Aunt Ellie said, "do you have your Uncle Myron's address?"

"Yes. Are you going to write him?"

"No. In case anything happens to me while I'm left here all alone, I want you to notify Myron first. He'll make all the arrangements about where to ship my body and all."

"Haila," Jeff pleaded.

He steered me out into the hall, hastily pulled the door shut behind him. Before we reached the vestibule the radio blared out from our living room. There was nothing Aunt Ellie liked so much as to settle down with a good book beside a radio going full blast. Sometimes, if the book and the radio weren't up to her standard of interest, she crocheted while reading and listening, so as not to waste a moment. I have never known Aunt Ellie to complete a book, finish any piece of crocheting larger than a coaster for a shot glass or know what had been said, sung or played on the radio. But I knew that for an hour or two she would be happy and I prepared to forget about her. There was another lady somewhere in New York who apparently needed some thinking about.

The snow plows were out in force. The little buglike ones nipped futilely at the mounting drifts and even the huge sanitation trucks with blades attached to their fronts were battling the storm to no more than a draw. New York City, whether it liked it or not, was being inundated. It would take a hundred thousand men to dig us out. I could hear the Mayor's tears bouncing off the budget.

At Sixth Avenue we gave up even trying for a taxi. We struggled down to West Fourth Street and headed east. Crossing the lower edge of Washington Square was acute agony. The wind seemed to have sworn out a personal vendetta against me. I clung to Jeff's arm, lowered my head against the driving, slashing pretty snowflakes and kept my mind on the brandy I would have at our journey's end.

We turned right into Thompson Street, plodded on across West Third, and there was the Belfast Bar. I followed Jeff down the five steep steps from the sidewalk.

The Belfast made no claim to being part Grille, part Cafe; it was all saloon. The hot, heavy air was untainted by frying onion or hamburger; it reeked pure beer. To our right stood the bar, one of those Victorian masterpieces of mahogany and brass that had managed to survive Prohibition. Along the opposite wall a row of narrow booths built for two stretched into the gloomy rear of the freight-car shaped room. There was a frowzy moose head, the sword of a swordfish, a picture of a 1901 stag picnic, a reproduction of Abe Lincoln's tavern license. This was a man's place, a perfect hideout for the neighborhood's harried husbands. Although no one so much as glanced at me, I felt like an intruder.

Business was brisk. A scurrying waiter delivered a drink to one

booth, snatched an empty glass from another, slapped at the table of a third with a sleazy towel. At the bar a dozen customers appreciatively watched the old bartender tighten the collars on a row of beers. At a wall telephone a man was dialing a number. Another man, one who had obviously closed the joint the night before and opened it that morning, stood in front of the cigarette machine and argued with himself about which brand of smokes he liked. One of these men was Frank Lorimer.

"What'll it be, folks?"

The old bartender made it an important question, something to consider carefully and thoughtfully. His pale eyes peered solemnly out of his thin, wrinkled face. A fringe of gray hair encircled his nude, battle-scarred skull. He reached beneath the bar and brought up an ashtray, rubbed it clean with a swivel of his shirted elbow and set it before us. He smiled a broad, professional smile.

"I'll have a beer," Jeff said.

"And the lady?"

Before I could answer, a tenor voice chirped, "Hey, you, two more of the same!" A little man had roughly jostled a place for himself beside me at the bar. His chubby, apple-cheeked face with its bushy eyebrows jeered as the old bartender glared at him. He repeated his order and the bartender cut him short.

"I'm serving the lady," he said. "Lady, what will you have?"

"I'd like a brandy, please."

"We got brandy, lady, but I wouldn't recommend it to my worst enemy. Have something else. Do yourself a favor."

"Well . . . a sherry?"

"A sherry and a beer. Right." He picked up the two empty glasses that the man beside me had thrust across the bar. He said to him, "Your friend in the booth want the same?"

"That's what I said."

"That's what I thought you said, but I couldn't believe my ears. Your friend has no respect for his stomach. A martini is tough enough when it's vermouth with gin, but . . . well, it's his stomach."

Jeff asked, "What's he doing to his stomach?"

"Sherry," the bartender said, "instead of vermouth. Gin and sherry. Well, it takes all kinds to make a world."

"C'mon," the little man squealed, "c'mon."

"Yes, sir." The bartender was being sarcastic. "Very well, sir."

His hands moving like dancer's, he lined four glasses in the groove of the bar, added a shaker, a bottle of gin, a bottle of sherry to the row. He drew two beers. He flipped ice into the shaker, poured gin onto the ice, lifted the other bottle, flipped it briefly over the shaker and, without righting it, switched it to my glass. Everyone watched him; it was a performance. He twisted a sliver of lemon peel into the cocktail glass. With one hand he spun the ice in the martini, with the other he corked the two bottles. He poured the cocktail, recapped the beers and that was that.

"You're a handy man around a bar," Jeff said.

The old man grinned. "I've made a study of it." He hurried away in answer to an urgent cry for another beer.

I watched the little tenor take the two drinks back to his booth. I saw a hand stretch across the table corner and snatch at the martini. It disappeared behind the booth's high back.

"I've been here before," Jeff said to me. "That moose head . . . I remember that moose head."

I looked at it. It was ignoring me; its bulging eyes were directed straight at Jeff. "It seems to remember you, too. Jeff, we just sit here and wait?"

"That was what Mr. Lorimer suggested."

We sipped our drinks, each smoked two cigarettes. We listened to a discussion of the future of the helicopter, a debate on Jim Corbett versus Joe Louis, a heated argument about the advisability of tearing down the Third Avenue El. We ordered two more of the same. Newcomers stamped in, shaking snow from their hats. The line at the bar grew until it was two deep. We were jostled and nudged by bending elbows. Still no one introduced himself to us as Mr. Frank Lorimer.

In the bar mirror I carefully inspected the wall of reflected faces. It only proved that if Lorimer was in sight, his was a face I'd never seen before. A few women had drifted in, but if one of theirs was the life in danger, she was not at all unnerved by the fact.

The beery gentleman who had been shopping for cigarettes when we arrived tapped Jeff on the shoulder. "What do you know?" he inquired.

"Not much," Jeff said.

The man shoved his hat back on his head and a smug look spread over his face. He had watery blue eyes set too close to a

long, thin nose and a twisted, colorless mouth. "Twenty years," he said, "I been asking people what they know. Always get one of two answers. 'Not much' or 'You're drunk.' Never misses. Sure fire."

"Try him." Jeff nodded toward our red-faced neighbor who seemed to have permanently deserted his friend in the booth. "See what he says."

"I did. He said, 'You're drunk.' Convinced?"

"Never misses," Jeff agreed.

"Sure fire," the student of human nature said.

A new voice wheezed over my shoulder and into my ear. I could hardly hear the two whispered words. "Excuse me."

A little white-haired old man was standing at my elbow. His face was a gnome's with a thousand crisscrossing wrinkles. The unmatched trousers and coat of his ancient suit had been patched until parts of it were a crazy quilt and each patch looked like a bid for a prize in a sewing contest. His decrepit but spotless shirt was multi-mended, even his necktie had been stitched back into service. He was immaculate, exquisite, obviously a bum. In his hands was a long-handled broom.

I slid down off my stool and stepped back from the bar; Jeff did the same and we watched the little old man sweep the worn, shredding floor beneath our chairs as meticulously as if he had been cleaning the royal rug in the bedchamber of His Majesty, the King.

"Hello, Pop," the drunk said to him. "What do you know?"

"Not much," the old man whispered, and smiled.

The drunk turned triumphantly to Jeff. "See? But it get monotonous. Any wonder I drink?"

"No wonder," Jeff said.

"I'm justified. But I been drinking too much." He placed his glass firmly on the bar. "I'm on the wagon. I'll never touch another drop."

There was a moment's silence in honor of the gentleman's good intentions. Then Jeff said, "How about a beer?"

The drunk said, "Don't care if I do. Thanks."

He deeply drank our health and wandered away. The little old man was sweeping his way down the line. The bartender placed a double shot of whiskey and a large beer chaser at the end of the bar. As the sweeper drew closer to it he speeded up. The last few feet of floor got only a lick and a promise. Flinging the broom in

a corner he settled himself before his reward. He was like a man come home from a too long journey.

I looked at the clock framed in the whiskey advertisement. We had been waiting now for almost an hour. "Darling," I said, "how do we decide how long to stay here?"

"Let's smoke one more cigarette."

Jeff lit mine, then muffed his own. He tore another match from the packet, but he didn't use it. He was looking at the inside of the packet. Without speaking, he handed it to me.

The words were printed in pencil, printed minutely with a labored, desperate clarity that shouted the importance of the message:

"Can't talk here. Meet me at Carlin's Bar. 14th Street near 3rd." There was one more word; it was "HURRY," and it was underlined twice.

"Jeff, how did Lori . . ."

He stopped me from saying the name. "Someone must be watching him," he said very softly. "He doesn't want that someone to know about us and start watching us, too. That would end our value to him . . . and to his lady friend."

Involuntarily, I glanced around the room. It might have been any neighborhood bar on any snowy Sunday afternoon. At the moment everyone seemed to be minding his own business, no one minding ours.

I slipped into my coat while Jeff paid the bill. We said good-bye to the old bartender and worked our way out of the Belfast Bar, out into the unabating storm. There wasn't a cab in sight. We headed for Fourteenth Street and, obeying the plea in Frank Lorimer's message, we hurried. As far as we could tell, we were not followed.

2

CARLIN'S BAR WAS AS PUBLIC AS the Belfast had been intimate. It was a huge, flashy place, all personality, no character. The décor was in key with the juke box that

looked like a rainbow on a bender. It was no place for a quiet drink. It was Fourteenth Street at its gaudiest. Even the trio of bartenders seemed to be on leave from Coney Island.

Jeff and I sat halfway back in the imitation leather and chromium tunnel where we could watch the door. For over an hour we had been watching it. We had seen it open and close dozens of times. We had examined a hundred faces; not one of them had we recognized from the Belfast Bar. We had peered into a hundred pairs of eyes and waited for some sign; no one did more than glance indifferently at us.

"Jeff," I said, "maybe Frank has changed his mind about saving the lady's life."

"I don't think Frank would do that."

"You don't know about Frank. Maybe he's got a fickle streak in him. That he inherited from his father."

"He's doing the best he can, Haila. You can be sure of that."

"If only he'd given us more of a message at the Belfast."

"He was being watched."

"I wonder if we're being watched."

"Relax, Haila. Give Frank a chance."

Jeff leaned back, lit a cigarette, lapped at his beer with enjoyment. I tried to lean back in my chair and only some adroit squirming prevented me from falling completely off it. Jeff laughed at me; I didn't laugh back. A suspicion had crawled into my mind and it blossomed into a fact. There was no doubt about it. Jeff Troy was a swine. I could prove it and I would.

"Darling," I said, "may I see that match fold?" He handed it to me and I examined it again. "You know," I said, "anyone could have written this."

"What?" Jeff asked.

"You wanted some beer," I said enigmatically, and enigmatically I continued. "Before Frank Lorimer called you mentioned that you would like some beer."

"Did I?" He was playing it cagey, but it was futile. I had him.

"Yes, you did. Then the phone rang and a guy named Frank Lorimer wanted to see you in a place where there's beer. Then Frank sent you to another place where, also, there is beer. But," I said and I paused to torture Jeff, "but I didn't hear the phone ring. And . . . and anybody could have written this message. Jeff, you

swine! I say it once and I say it again. You swine."

"Me?" Jeff said incredulously. "A swine?"

"Precisely. You staged that phone call. You wrote that message. There is no Lorimer. This is all some ill-conceived treachery on your part to get away from Aunt Ellie and drink some beer."

"You're wrong, Haila. I'm fond of Aunt Ellie."

"You needn't be fond of her. There's no reason for you to be fond of my relatives. But to go to such lengths to get her out of your sight is an insult to Aunt Ellie. After all, she is my mother's sister."

"That's a hell of a thing to say about your mother."

"You see? You do detest Aunt Ellie!"

"No. She calls me 'Jeffie,' but I do not detest her." He was speaking carefully, formally and with great feeling. It made me realize that he had a lot to get off his chest and I let him go on. "I spend," he said, "an exhausting week at the studio, clicking a heavy camera all day, and on Sunday I want to recuperate. But I don't detest Aunt Ellie for sapping my remaining strength with her giddy chatter. I realized when I married you that you undoubtedly had some rather eerie relatives who would be coming to New York to see Grant's Tomb and the Flatiron Building and to buy some store clothes."

The swine had gone too far. "Jeff, did I complain about your Uncle Niel?"

"Uncle Niel has no small talk. He's a man of character."

"Yes! For one month he sat in stony silence, staring at me!"

"That, Haila, should have flattered you."

"It gave me the creeps. He was staring at me because he claims that smoking cigarettes kills women. He was waiting for me to keel over."

"We were not discussing Uncle Niel, Haila."

"Oh, no! We never discuss your side of the family."

"Frankly, I don't blame your Aunt Ellie's husband for hiding in a cave."

"He is not hiding. He's a guide in the Great Mountain Cavern."

"Haila, he knows that Cavern like a book. He gets himself lost for days at a time on purpose. To avoid Ellie."

"That isn't true. He's devoted to her."

"Then why doesn't he ever go home? Because he finds it more

invigorating to sit on a stalactite and talk to a stalagmite."

"You don't even know what you're talking about. Nobody can sit on a stalactite. They're the ones that drip down. If my uncle ever finds time to sit while on duty in the cave, he sits on a stalagmite. Honestly, Jeff, you don't seem to . . ."

"She's cute, isn't she?"

I turned around. A lanky, gawking newsboy stood beside our table. With one hand he clutched a thin sheaf of early edition tabloids, with the other he rubbed his face in embarrassment. He gulped before he spoke to Jeff.

"Is that your hat and coat there?"

"Yes," Jeff said. "Would you like to borrow them?"

"No." The boy was serious. Now he was looking at my seedy old storm coat. "Is that a fur coat, Missus?"

"It was in its day."

The boy looked once more at Jeff's hat and coat, then at mine. He made a decision. He thrust a newspaper abruptly at Jeff's hand and skipped for the door. Jeff dropped the tabloid in my hands as he chased after him. While he towed him back to our table I glanced at the paper. Jeff had known without reading it what made this copy of the tabloid a very special edition.

In the top margin of the first page, written in the same labored printing as the message on the match fold, was another bulletin for our information. It said: "Still followed. See you in the lobby of the Royale."

The newsboy was frightened. He kept saying over and over: "I'm not supposed to talk to you."

"It's all right," Jeff said.

"I was just supposed to give you the paper, that's all."

"I know and I want to pay you for it."

"The guy paid me. Five bucks."

Jeff picked up a five dollar bill from the remains of a twenty that lay on our table. He passed it to the boy and his eyes bugged. "That makes ten! I guess I can stand gettin' into trouble for ten."

Jeff was annoyed. "I'm not going to do anything to get you into trouble." He laughed at the kid. "I have a son your age."

"Yeah?" The boy grinned and sat on the chair Jeff swung toward him. "Aw, you're not old enough."

"He's really my step-son. It's her child. Jeff nodded at me. "By

a former marriage to an old Harvard, Princeton, Yale man."

The kid looked at me and laughed. He was feeling a lot better. He said, "I'd be glad to help you if I could. But I don't know nothin'."

"Tell me what you do know."

"Well, I was leanin' against an El pillar watchin' a snow machine when this guy spoke to me from the other side of the pillar. He scared the pants off me because I didn't know he was there even. First thing he says for me to pretend he wasn't talkin' to me. Then he passed me the five bucks around the front of the pillar and tells me to pass him a paper around the front of the pillar, too. He made that sound important—the front of the pillar—so I knew for sure then somebody was in back of us on the sidewalk watchin'. It was all I could do to keep from turnin' around."

The boy had started off at a fast clip, but now he was speaking like a machine gun, as if the quicker he did his part the more money he would be earning per minute. He was enjoying his job now, too.

"I give the guy the paper and he tells me to wait a second. All I could see of him was his hands writin' on the paper. He slides the paper back to me and he says for me to bring it in here to you. He told me what you two was wearin'. Then he said for me not to move till he was out of sight. I stood there pretendin' to watch the snow machine and all of a sudden he runs across the rest of the street and out of sight. That's it, that's all."

"You must have got a look at him when he crossed the street," Jeff said.

"No. All I seen was a hat and a big overcoat. And a red scarf."

"Was he tall or short?" Jeff asked.

"Well, not tall. He was runnin' and crouched over. . . . I don't know."

"You didn't even catch a glimpse of his face?"

"No. He never give me the chance."

"Did you wait to see if you could tell who was following him?"

"Sure." The kid grinned; he was pleased with himself. "Because I was wonderin' about that myself. But it was no go. He waited till the light changed before he run, as if that was what he was waitin' for all the time, I guess. Then a whole mob of people come across the street. You know . . . Third and Fourteenth."

"Well," Jeff said, "thanks a lot."

"Thank you a lot! Ten bucks in all!"

"What are you going to do with it? Give it to your mother?"

The boy laughed. "No, sir! All that would come out of that would be a hangover and it wouldn't even be me that had it." He got up, but he didn't seem to want to leave. "I wish there was somethin' else I could do for you. Is there maybe?"

"No," Jeff said. "Thanks again."

"Okay."

The boy headed for the door. As he passed an empty booth, he threw the rest of his newspapers into it. He looked back at us and waved and went on out into the snow.

"Read me the mail, Haila," Jeff said.

"All right. 'Still followed. See you in the lobby of the Royale.' Darling, it seems I was hasty to accuse you of having enough imagination to invent Frankie to escape Aunt Ellie. I'm sorry."

"You're convinced now about Frank and his lady?"

"Yes, of course. Let's get to the Royale. Quickly."

"The Royale," Jeff said. "I never heard of it."

"It's on Seventy-second just off Fifth."

"Oh. Fashionable."

"Very. Oodles of suicides."

"We'll take the Lexington Avenue Subway."

We went north and up north we found the blizzard, being closer to home, was really spreading itself. As we mushed across Park Avenue I had to hang onto Jeff two-handed or the wind would have rolled me down New York's grandest canyon all the way to Grand Central Station. At last the marquee of the Royale took shape through the swirling snow and, as we scurried for its cover, a man and a woman swung in ahead of us. A giant doorman, wrapped to the teeth in conservative but rugged livery of maroon, majestically braved the elements to open the door. He spoke to the man.

"Mr. Troy?" he said.

"Here!" Jeff said. "I'm Troy."

"Jeff Troy."

"Right."

"Got something for you." He reluctantly doffed his admiral's hat and fumbled inside it. "Funny business. Fellow pushed this at me and disappeared around the corner before I knew what was hap-

pening." From one envelope he drew a second one. He handed it to Jeff. "There was ten dollars and a note for me. It said to give that to Jeff Troy when he showed up. Whoever your friend is, he's generous."

"How long ago was he here?"

"Not more than five minutes ago. Maybe less. Excuse me, I'm freezing."

A wisp of beautiful warmth touched us as he opened the lobby door and slipped inside. Jeff turned his back to the wind and unsealed the envelope. I leaned close to him and read Frank Lorimer's third order of the day.

"Please go to Times Square. Keep walking around the Times Building till I talk to you. Don't look at me when I do. The enclosed is only part payment."

Jeff pulled some money out of the envelope.

"Fifty dollars," he said. "Frank must have been afraid we'd give up on him."

We started back to Lexington Avenue and the subway.

Jeff said, "Haila, this is hardly a day to stroll around and around the Times Building. You go home."

"No. Don't make me, Jeff."

"Frank mightn't be able to connect with us this time, either. We might have to keep on moving."

"I know." I waited a moment until I had enough breath saved up to speak again. "If only he had given us the lady's name in one of his messages. We could go straight to her."

"There's probably a great deal more to tell us than a name."

"But a name would help."

"It would," Jeff said. "But on second thought, I have a hunch that Frank's going to get to us at the Times Building."

"I wonder," I said, "which of the men we saw at the Belfast Bar could have been Lorimer?"

"It's useless to try to figure that out. We saw fifty men. And maybe we didn't see Lorimer at all."

A half block ahead of us the subway entrance gaped a black welcome in the surrounding whiteness. We quickened our steps and ran for it.

We had turned the first corner of the steps before we heard the whistles echoing hollowly from the cavern below us. We had turned

the second before we knew what they meant.

There were trains in the station, but there was no sound of sliding doors, of rolling wheels, of motors starting and dying. The trains were standing still. There were people on the platform, but they were strangely quiet. There was only the shriek of whistles and that came from the black depths of the tunnels beyond.

I clung to Jeff as he moved forward. They were lifting a still, limp figure from the tracks when we reached the platform. I saw a dark overcoat, a nondescript hat. A subway guard stooped and, for a moment, he was swallowed in the gully of the tracks, down between two cars. When he stood up again there was a length of red wool in his hands.

I stood on tiptoe as two men lifted the body. The man's head fell to one side. I saw the round, wrinkled face, the wisps of white hair. I caught Jeff's arm.

"Jeff," I whispered, "he . . ."

"Yes," Jeff said. "We did see him."

Frank Lorimer had been in the bar with us. He had stood close beside us; we had watched him at his work. Frank Lorimer was the little man with the broom at the Belfast Bar.

3

THE BARTENDER AT THE BELFAST smiled a pleased welcome at us. He seemed to have won a bet with himself that we would be back again that evening. He stepped to the only pair of empty chairs at the bar and waited for us to make ourselves at home.

"The same?" he asked. "A sherry and a beer?"

"No," Jeff said. "We came to talk to you about Frank Lorimer."

"What's that name again?"

Jeff repeated it.

The bartender shook his head. "It don't register with me."

"He works here. He was working here this afternoon."

"No. I was the only one working. Sunday I take the whole day and, believe me, it's a long one."

"Frank Lorimer," Jeff said, "was sweeping up this afternoon while we were here."

"Oh, you mean old Pop!" The bartender chuckled. "I never think of what he does as being work. Every time he sweeps out the place we give him a drink. Finally we had to cut him down to sweeping once an hour. What did you say his name is?"

Jeff told it to him again.

"Well, well." The bartender called down the bar. "Say Harry, did you know Pop's name was Frank Lorimer?"

Harry said he didn't, that he had always thought it was James Pierpont Morgan. The Belfast rocked with laughter. The bartender wiped tears of mirth out of his eyes and turned back to us.

"Everybody just calls him Pop. Why, I never thought about him having a name." He stopped grinning. "What's wrong? Pop get himself in some kind of trouble? I noticed he was gone. But sometimes Pop gets so thirsty he goes all around the neighborhood sweeping the bars. Something happen to him?"

"He was killed about an hour ago," Jeff said. "A subway train ran over him."

"No!"

The bartender slapped his hand down on the wet bar. It made a spanking sound and then the room was quiet. After a moment the customers came crowding around, staring curiously at us. Somebody asked a question, then all of them asked questions at once.

"We don't know much about it," Jeff said. "We were at the subway stop at Lexington and Seventy-seventh. We saw them lifting him off the tracks. They took him away in a police ambulance."

"He's in the morgue," somebody said.

"I suppose so," Jeff said. "We came here because we thought somebody should know. His family should be told."

"His family," the bartender said.

"Sure," the man who was Harry said, "the family should always be notified in a case like this. But Pop never gave the impression that he had any family."

"That's right," another voice said. "Guys like Pop don't have no family."

"Where does he live?" Jeff asked.

"Live?"

Two or three voices said the word together and it was as though it was a new idea to them that Frank Lorimer had ever lived anyplace. Somebody guessed that he must have had a room but nobody knew where it might be.

"When I bought this place four, five years ago," the bartender said, "Pop come with it just like one of the fixtures. He never talked to no one unless they talked to him. And I guess none of us ever did talk to him except we was kidding him. You know how you do to a drunk."

"He didn't look like a drunk to me," Jeff said.

"You're right about that. I been watching people drink longer than you been alive, and I never seen a man like Pop. He didn't look drunk, he didn't act drunk, but he was drunk every minute he was awake. I guess he's been like that for all his life. Being stewed was the same as breathing to Pop. He would have died if he'd stopped drinking, just like as if he stopped breathing. I can't explain it."

"Being sober to Pop," Harry said, "was like being drunk to other people."

"Yeah," the bartender agreed, "that sums it up. He was a stew."

"Did he have any special friend?" Jeff asked.

"Everybody was Pop's friend," the bartender said.

Harry said, "Everybody thought the world and all of Pop."

Jeff said, "Did he ever mention a wife? Or a sister?"

"He never mentioned anything about himself," the bartender said. "Maybe because nobody ever thought to ask him. I know I never did. And now he's dead. It just goes to show."

"It makes you think," Harry said.

"I'd like to know," somebody said, "where Pop was going on a subway."

"Yeah," the bartender said, "I don't understand that."

Jeff didn't enlighten him. He said, "It would help if we could find out where he lived."

"For God's sake," Harry said. "Cook! Sol Cook!"

"Why, sure," the bartender said. "Sol takes him home every night."

"Every night without a miss except Wednesdays since I don't know when," Harry said.

"Did Pop need taking home?" Jeff asked.

"I see you still don't understand," the bartender said. He was a little annoyed. "Pop wasn't drunk, he was a stew. Sol took him home because he is a cabbie and he rode Pop home because Sol is a nice guy and he liked Pop. Sol stops in here for a last drink on his way to the garage."

"He comes in about ten," Harry said.

A frowzy matron sitting alone before an empty glass of beer suddenly began to weep, noisily, grotesquely. Everyone turned to look at her.

"Shut up," Harry said.

"Let her alone," somebody said. "She's cryin' for Pop."

"She never knew Pop," Harry said. "This is her first time here." He went to the woman. "Shut up."

"It ain't a natural way to die," the woman said, sniveling. "God never meant no one to die under a subway."

"You're right about that," Harry said, "but shut up. For my money when they finish tearing down the elevateds, they can rip up all the subways. Every one of them including the Lexington Avenue and especially the Lexington Avenue. Shut up."

It was a little after ten when the bartender introduced Jeff and me to Sol Cook. I thought it was shocking that Sol smiled while he listened to the news of Frank Lorimer's death, but after a minute I realized that the smile was engraved on his hard, peaked face like a scar. His voice when he spoke to us was flat with indifference.

"I don't know exactly where Pop lived. I always dropped him off at the corner of Great Jones Street and Bolton. Come on, I'll show you."

"Sol," the bartender said, "finish your drink."

"No, thanks," Sol said.

He led us to his dilapidated cab and nursed open its crippled left door. He climbed into his seat and reached for the meter. His hand stopped halfway there and went back to the steering wheel. The flag stayed down. It took us ten minutes to get to Great Jones and Bolton and for ten minutes Sol cursed the inefficiency of New York's snow clearance system which is the most efficient in the world and works miracles. He didn't have a word, good or bad, to say about Frank Lorimer, and his strident monologue prevented us from even mentioning the name.

He halted the cab across the mouth of a narrow alley. He said, "This is where I always left him. Bolton's a short, dead end street. You oughtn't to have any trouble findin' Pop's place."

Jeff tried to tell him that we appreciated his help, but Sol shut him up with an angry look. He sat there behind the wheel, making no move to drive on. We stood beside him in the snow.

"Do you want to come with us?" Jeff asked.

Sol ignored his question.

"I was always on my way to the garage," he said, "so naturally there was never no question of him bein' a fare. But one night he made me clock it from the bar to here and it run forty-five cents. From then on he always tipped me. Ten percent, a nickel. Every night he give me a nickel. I had to take it. He'd drop it on my lap and then walk away into that lousy lookin' street there."

"Did he ever talk to you about himself?" Jeff asked.

"It wouldn't surprise me none if he talked more to me than anybody. But never much about himself. Two things he hated and griped like hell about all the time. One was automobiles. If he wasn't dead tired by ten o'clock, I don't think he'd ever set foot in this hack. He used to sit on the edge of the seat back ther cursin' automobiles to hell and back. Don't ask me why. And he hated cops. Even if he seen a cop helpin' an old woman across the street he hated that cop."

"You don't know why?"

Sol shook his head. "Nope. Now, I hate cops. It's part of my business to. But with Pop it was different. He hated cops and automobiles like it was his religion. I used to get sick of listenin' to him and I'd tell him so. Then he'd shut up for as long as he could. He was a thoughtful old guy. He never wanted to cause no one any trouble."

Jeff said, "Did he ever mention any particular woman to you?"

"Huh?" Sol gave Jeff a long look; he seemed to think he was being kidded. "No," he said, "he never mentioned no particular woman. It never struck me that there was any women in Pop's life one way or another. Pop was old."

"I was thinking of a relative," Jeff said. "A sister. Or maybe even a wife."

"I'd be willin' to bet," Sol said thoughtfully, "that if Pop had any part of a family, he wouldn't have spent his life in a lousy

saloon. I can tell things like that about a man. Well, the mechanics are waitin' to paste this old crate back together again."

He pummeled the old crate into gear and drove abruptly away. Jeff and I turned toward the gray hole that was the entrance to Bolton Street. We walked slowly into it.

One side of the alley was completely taken up, from the corner to the dead end, by a warehouse of one of the big department stores. We concentrated on the other side. We passed the dark fronts of a plumbers' supply house, a tinner's shop, an empty store. Then we halted before a shoddy, bleak old building left over from the long-ago residential days of this part of the city. It was three stories high with a slanting roof that sported two jaunty but slightly askew dormer windows. This had to be the place where Frank Lorimer had lived. Between it and the dead end stood three mates to this house, but they were discarded, boarded-up derelicts.

A dim light seeped from the hallway of Frank Lorimer's home and touched up a square of the trampled snow before the two-step stoop. I followed Jeff into the vestibule. There were no mail boxes, no bells. The door was unlocked.

Jeff pushed it open and we stepped into the hallway. Ahead of us was a narrow staircase, on each side of us a door. Jeff knocked on one of them; there was no response. He turned to the other. A piece of sash weight was tied to the heating pipe beside it. Jeff used it for what it was obviously intended, but the clank of the weight on the pipe brought no answer. He knocked on the door and it swung open under his fist. The room was dark.

"Let's go in," Jeff said.

"I'd rather not," I whispered. "There might be someone sleeping in there."

"Hello!" Jeff called. No one answered. "It's empty, Haila. And Frank's room would be empty."

"Lots of rooms might be empty. It's only ten-thirty."

"All right, we'll inspect all the empty rooms. If we can."

We located the string that hung from a chandelier. The forty-watt bulb in it did little to cheer up the place. A lovely old carved mantle emphasized the dinginess of the furnishings, the iron bed, a chair, a table, a bureau that would have made a junk dealer turn up his nose. The wall paper was peeling, the floor was scuffed raw. The few pictures on the walls were so faded that, in the dim light,

their subjects were not discernible. As we looked about us we could see nothing that even indicated the sex of the room's tenant. Jeff opened the door of a lopsided wardrobe.

A man's suit and a light overcoat sagged limply from two hangers. There were several pairs of old shoes, an umbrella. On the shelf was an ancient high silk hat, a collar box, a stack of newspapers. That was all I had time to see. An angry voice from the doorway made us both jump. A heavy-set, ill-kempt woman glared at us and repeated her question.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Jeff said, "Are you the landlady?"

"Maybe I am. Who are you? Coming in here, breaking into Mr. Culligan's room! I should call the police!"

"No, you shouldn't," Jeff said. "I'm afraid we've got bad news for you. One of your roomers has been in an accident. He's dead, he was killed in a subway station. Frank Lorimer."

The woman stared at him.

"I'm sorry," Jeff said, "to be blunt."

"Killed," the woman said. "Who was killed?"

"Frank Lorimer."

She shook her head. "I don't know him. There was no Frank Lorimer here."

"People called him Pop. He was an old man."

Jeff described him to her, but she kept shaking her head. "No one here like that."

"But he's got to live here, he . . ."

"I know who I rent my rooms to!" The woman was angry, her voice loud and rasping.

"I mean," Jeff said, "that Frank Lorimer lived on this street. And this is the only house on this street where he could possibly have been."

The woman heard the concern and the urgency in Jeff's voice and it quieted her. She said, "I wish I could help you. But there's nobody named Frank Lorimer here, nobody that looks like that old man. I know, it's my house. I have six roomers now. Mr. Culligan, the Smalley brothers, Corson, Highley and Voldi. And I'd thank you to step out in the hall, please, before Mr. Culligan should come home."

She turned out the light and ushered us from the room. I looked

helplessly at Jeff; he was looking at the landlady. He said, "For years a friend of Frank's has been bringing him to this street. This is the only house on it that . . ."

The woman was impatient again. "I know, you told me that. And I still can't help you. I'm sorry this friend of yours got killed, but there's nothing I can do about it."

"Thanks," Jeff said. "Sorry to have bothered you."

We stood in the center of Bolton Street and looked again at the blackened windows of the few stores, the boarded-up windows of the derelict houses, the flat expanse of warehouse wall.

I said, "Jeff, where do we go now? Where can we go?"

"To the cops," Jeff said. "By now they may have something on him. Someone might even have come to the morgue to identify him. A woman maybe."

4

"TROY, TROY," THE LIEUTENANT detective said, "I thought you were a big enough boy now not to be taken in by a drunk."

"Frank Lorimer was not a drunk."

"His body was full of alcohol."

"But he never got silly, sloppy or careless drunk," Jeff insisted. "He didn't fall in front of that subway. He was pushed. He was murdered."

"Murdered," Detective Hankins said. He turned to me. "Mrs. Troy, take your husband home and put him to bed."

"I think that Frank Lorimer was murdered, too. And I think that proves that the woman he told us about is going to be killed. If she hasn't been already."

"Don't be gruesome, Mrs. Troy." Hankins laughed and wagged his head. "You two kids delight me. An old soak gets an hallucination and you fall for it head over heels. Jack and Jill. Look, a drunk falls in front of a subway every other day."

"So it was a coincidence," Jeff said. "He had this hallucination

and then he just happened to fall in front of this subway."

"Any guy drunk enough to dream up what he did, I'd expect something like that to happen to him sooner or later, if he wasn't careful."

"He wasn't drunk!" Jeff shouted. "Haila and I saw him at the Belfast Bar. He was as steady as you are."

Hankins grinned. "Now you're accusing me of being spiffed. Now, now, Troy, don't get sore. We're old friends."

"Yeah, and what's a couple of murders between friends? Listen, if there's one chance in a hundred that you can keep a woman from dying, isn't it worth working on? What the hell else have you got to do?"

"Now, Troy, you're going to make me sore."

"Sore enough to take your big feet off that desk?"

Hankins slammed down his feet and the floor of the little office shook. He stuck his chin at Jeff; he was livid. "I take a lot of guff from a lot of irate tax-payers," he roared, "but I'll be damned if I'll take it from you!"

"All right," Jeff said.

"I'm a good cop, I do my job. And if there was any job here for me to do, I'd do it."

"Sit down," Jeff suggested.

"We get hundreds of things like this a year and one of them out of a hundred turns out not to be crack-pot. But what can we do about it? Why don't you get the city budget changed? You're a voter. Fix it so there are ten thousand more men on the Homicide Squad."

"I'll try," Jeff said.

"Thanks," Hankins said. He sat down. "Then I can have a longer vacation. Damn you, Troy."

"You like me again."

"I love you again. You're going to get murdered some day, you know you are. And I promise to find the guy that done it. To thank him for doing it."

"Has that thought cheered you up enough," Jeff asked, "to help me some more with Frank Lorimer?"

Hankins groaned. "Anything you say, anything."

"You'll keep the pressure on the boys. To keep them working on Frank's identification."

"They'll do that anyway. It's routine."

"You'll see that his description is sent out."

"To everywhere in the world," Hankins said wearily.

"Just make it the United States and Canada."

"Oh, shut up."

"And you'll send out his fingerprints?"

"Honest, Troy, honest I will."

"And," Jeff said, "will you call the morgue again? To see if anything new has developed?"

"No, Mr. Troy, I won't. I called them ten minutes ago."

"There must have been something on him that meant something," Jeff argued. "There had to be. It's unusual for a man not to have a wallet, something."

"You rolled the poor old drunk, Troy," Hankins said. "You got all his money. You probably took everything. I ought to lock you up."

"Listen," Jeff said, "why can't you trace the tattoo on his arm? Find out how old it is, where it might have been done, who did it."

Hankins guffawed. "You've been reading the Sunday supplement again, kid. Modern police methods, huh? Oh, brother! Trace a tattoo! Put that on the agenda for the next election, Troy. A tattoo tracing department."

"Every big city should have one," Jeff said. "That tattoo on Lorimer's arm . . . a horseshoe with the name Belle inscribed across it. Belle meant good luck to Frank. He liked Belle. She meant a great deal to him."

"Get that look out of your eyes, Troy."

"Is there a look in my eyes?"

"It wouldn't be practical for us to question every old girlie named Belle in the United States and Canada. It would take time and money that we don't have. I'm sure you understand, Troy, don't you? Please understand. We're understaffed."

"I'm leaving," Jeff said, "before you and I start slugging it out. I wouldn't want that to happen to you. As you say, you're understaffed here now. Good-bye, Friend Hankins."

"Good-bye, sweetheart."

"And you will keep the routine on Frank jumping?"

"I will," Hankins said, and he was serious. "So long, Mrs. Troy."

"So long."

We walked away from the police building on Centre Street, on across the great plaza of municipal, county and federal buildings that now, standing in the silence and the darkness of a winter Sunday night, were even more awe-inspiring than usual. We went on down into the Brooklyn Bridge station of the Lexington Avenue subway. We stood together on the nearly deserted platform, looking down at the cruel, shining rails of steel, thinking the same thoughts.

"Jeff," I said, "she mightn't be dead yet. She might not be."

"But Frank Lorimer is," Jeff said. "And he was the only person in the world who could have told us who she is."

"We mustn't give up, Jeff. We can't."

"We haven't."

"No." Then I said, "What is there to do, Jeff? There isn't anything, is there?"

"I haven't thought of anything."

"We're going home?"

"There doesn't seem to be any reason not to, Haila."

A train pulled into the station. Its door opened before us, closed behind us. We rode to Wanamaker's and walked across Eighth Street toward Gay Street and home.

I found myself staring into the face of each woman we passed, wondering hysterically if it was she who was to be murdered. I wanted to stop each one of them and inquire politely if she expected to be shot or knifed or poisoned and, if she did, could we be of any help to her, my husband and I? And then I wondered for the first time if the woman knew that she was about to be shot or knifed or poisoned. Somehow it seemed to me that she didn't. In a way that was better. If you were going to be murdered and nothing, nobody could prevent it, then in a way it was better not to know.

I looked up at Jeff and I felt a tiny hope stir inside me. I was worrying; that wasn't doing any good. Jeff was thinking; that might do some good. It had before. It could again, it had to.

Very quietly, Jeff unlocked the door of our apartment. Gently, he swung it open. Our living room was dark; Aunt Ellie was in bed on the studio couch and, I fervently hoped, fast asleep. Jeff eased the door shut behind us, then started soft-footing it for our bedroom. A variety of things happened at once.

Jeff stumbled and sprawled headlong to the floor. A horrendous

din of clashing pots and pans drowned out his heartfelt profanity. Aunt Ellie screamed. There was a rush of footsteps, the slam of a door. I got a light on.

Jeff was sitting up, disengaging his legs from our clothesline. He rose and, kicking my brand new colander out of his way, he stepped around the screen that shielded Aunt Ellie's bed. Fortunately, it was empty. Jeff would have smothered her with her own pillow; he knew his Shakespeare. He looked at me.

"If you laugh," he said, "if I hear as much as one titter from you, I'll behead you with a dull, unsterilized knife."

I believed him; I remained silent.

He tapped with a terrible gentleness on the bathroom door. "Aunt Ellie," he caroled, "Aunt Ellie, you can come out now. It's only me. Your nephew. Jeffie."

Aunt Ellie squealed incoherently.

"What, Aunt Ellie?"

She opened the door a sixteenth of an inch. "How do I know it's you? It might be a trap!"

"Open the door a little wider, Aunt Ellie," Jeff said, "and I'll show you my driver's license."

Bravely, Aunt Ellie opened the door and stepped into view. Jeff paled and fell back. Aunt Ellie had cornered the hair curler market and she was using all that she had. Her face was a blotch of unbecoming gray cream. A chin strap removed any remaining vestige of humanness from her appearance.

"Aunt Ellie," Jeff said, "you needn't have strung up that kitchenware trap to scare marauders away. You needed only to have left a light on."

She whinnied in acute consternation and hurried behind the screen. She called out to Jeff, "You should have been more careful. You might have hurt yourself."

"Aunt Ellie," Jeff said steadily, "I think your precautions are unnecessary. Nobody is going to harm you."

"I'm a woman, aren't I?"

"I'm too tired to get into an argument about what you are. You're safe, Aunt Ellie, sleep in peace."

"I'm a woman, and a woman friend of Frank Lanson's is going to be killed and I knew Frank Lanson very well. He delivered our milk for years and years."

"Lorimer," Jeff said, "not Lanson. Good night, Aunt Ellie."

"Good night, Jeffie."

"Jeff!" he shouted. "Jeff, not Jeffie!"

He limped away, slamming the bedroom door behind him. By the time I got Aunt Ellie tucked in and quieted down, Jeff was in bed. He wasn't asleep and I could tell from his eyes that it was not annoyance with Aunt Ellie that kept him awake. He had forgotten her; it was a woman whom he didn't know that he thought about now. I slipped into bed, turned out the light that was a glare in his face.

I didn't expect to sleep; it must have been complete exhaustion that claimed me. It was still pitch dark when I found myself standing in the center of the bedroom, wondering why I was there. Then I heard the scream again. I relaxed and went in to Aunt Ellie.

"Someone's in there," she gasped, pointing to the bathroom. "Hiding in there."

"Don't be silly," I snapped.

"Call Jeffie, call the police!"

"Be quiet," I said.

I was moving toward the bathroom when I heard the sound from beyond its closed door. I hesitated and stepped back. The bathroom door opened and Jeff walked out.

Without a glance at Aunt Ellie, he started for the bedroom and then changed his mind. He turned to me.

"Haila," he said, "I imagine Aunt Ellie will be screaming three or four more times before dawn."

"What?" I said.

"Yes, at least three or four more times. I drank a great deal of beer."

Jeff went back to bed and I followed him.

The next time I was awakened it was by the noise Jeff made in his effort to make no noise. It was still too dark for me to see the clock on the mantel, so dark that morning was still the future. It was unusual for Jeff to get up so early; it was even more unusual that he should be dressing as frantically as he seemed to be.

"Jeff, what is it?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"Where are you going?" I piled out of bed, started flinging my-

self into some clothes. "What's happening?"

"Haila," he said, "I think there's a chance that Frank Lorimer did live in that house on Bolton Street. I think we might even have been in his room."

"Jeff!"

"Did you see that hat on the shelf in the wardrobe?"

"Yes, an old silk one. It looked like an opera hat."

"No, it was an old coachman's hat, Haila. Well, add that to the tattoo on Frank Lorimer's arm."

"A coachman's hat and a tattoo equal . . . what?"

"That horseshoe," Jeff said, "mightn't have been a good luck symbol. I mean it might have been simply a horseshoe, and Belle might be a horse's name, not a girl's. A sentimental old coachman might have a tattoo like that on his arm."

"It's an awful long shot, Jeff."

"Yes, I know."

"But I'm praying you're right."

"If I am, that was Frank's room we were in. And we're getting some place."

"But why would the landlady lie?"

"You won't need to remind me to ask her that."

"All right. I'm ready, Jeff."

"If Aunt Ellie wakes up, I'll scream."

We managed not to disturb Aunt Ellie. We found a cab at the corner of Gay and Christopher Streets. At twenty to six we got into it, at nine to six we got out. The landlady was in front of her house. As we reached her, she pushed the last shovelful of snow from her narrow sidewalk into the narrow street.

"Good morning," Jeff said.

She didn't speak; she was not pleased to see us. It might have been that she had not yet had her coffee and wasn't fit to live with until she had her coffee. Or it might have been something else.

Jeff smiled pleasantly at her. "We'd like to see Mr. Culligan."

"Mr. Culligan?"

"Yes, he has that room there. First floor front."

"He's asleep now, still asleep."

Jeff started up the steps. "I'll wake him. It's time Mr. Culligan was up and about."

"Wait a minute," the landlady said. Jeff waited; so did the woman.

She stood looking at him, her face knotted with worry. "What do you want to come around here for? Why don't you mind your own business?"

"My business hours don't start until nine-thirty," Jeff said. "There isn't any Mr. Culligan, is there? That's Frank Lorimer's room, and I'm going in."

"What do you want to make trouble for poor old Frank for?"

"We couldn't if we wanted to," Jeff said. "Frank's dead. We told you that."

"Now he's dead, let him alone. He never hurt no one. He was a nice, quiet old man, clean, nice."

"Lady, we were friends of Frank's."

"No." She shook her head emphatically. "You're from the police."

"Why would the police be interested in Frank?"

"You ask so many questions. Just like the cops."

"Look. . . ."

"I kept Frank from being bothered when he was alive. I'll keep on doing the same now. Good-bye."

"Wait," Jeff said. She stopped on the steps and looked down at him.

"You were a friend of Frank's, weren't you?"

"An old man like that, alone, he needs a friend."

"Who was trying to bother him? Who did you keep away from him?"

"I don't want to talk. Good-bye."

"How long was Frank with you?"

"Six or seven years."

"You must have known him well, learned things about him. Did he ever tell you anything about himself?"

The woman laughed dismally. "What do people like Frank and me have to tell? You learn not to ask questions. It's nicer not to know, maybe. You're young yet."

Jeff said, "We'll look through his room. Maybe we can find something."

"No!" She spread herself across the door. "I won't let you in his room, poking through his things. No."

"All right," Jeff said. "But there must be someone who knew about Frank. His family should be traced and told. Don't you know anyone who was closer to Frank than you? Didn't he ever mention anyone?"

The woman sized Jeff up, then looked me over. She made a decision.

"Only one person I know. A fellow that works uptown in one of them big houses on Fifth Avenue. The house is shut up now. He's the caretaker."

"Is he a relative of Frank's?"

"Maybe. A friend anyway."

"Where on Fifth Avenue?"

"Sixty-ninth Street. It's closed up. You'll see it."

"Thank you," Jeff said.

"I hope I'm doing right."

"You are," Jeff said. "Sixty-ninth and Fifth?"

"You'll see it," the woman said.

We had no trouble at all finding the house on Fifth Avenue. It was the only one in the neighborhood that was boarded up. It was indeed boarded up. It seemed to have been carefully, lovingly wrapped in wood so that it would stay unsullied and beautiful for the return of its flighty family. The windows on each of its elegantly narrow four upper floors were sealed; the street door was completely encased in a sturdy false front. The place gave the impression of being loaded with treasure.

Across the Avenue, Central Park lay pure white in the early morning sun, a fairy tale park. Today its picture would appear in all the papers, amateur photographers would swarm it as they tried for prize winning shots. It was a photographer's paradise and I saw Jeff appraise it longingly.

But he turned away and faced the vacated mansion. Its sidewalk had just been cleared and swept, a shovel and a broom were propped beside the ajar false door. As we walked toward the door it was bumped open wider and a hand stretched out for the snow tools. Jeff shouted and a man stepped into view.

He was young, in his thirties, but that many years seemed too many for his long, thin frame. He was stooped into a position that set his head forward and out of line with his shoulders. This and his prominent nose and jutting chin gave the impression that, although he was standing stock still, he must be continually moving toward you. But the broad grin and his wide blue eyes belied the menace of his bearing.

"Hello," he said. "Something I can do for you?"

"We're friends of Frank Lorimer's," Jeff said.

"Of Frank's? Well!" The man shook hands with Jeff and nodded down at me. "What's your name?"

"Troy," Jeff said. "Haila and Jeff Troy."

"Mine's Joyce," the man said. "Eddie Joyce. Say, I hope Frank's not in any kind of trouble."

"Well . . ." Jeff hesitated.

"It's serious, huh?"

"Frank's dead."

"Dead," Joyce said. After a moment he said, "Was it an accident? I know Frank was old, but he was in pretty good shape. It must have been an accident."

"He was killed by a subway train," Jeff said. "But we don't think it was an accident."

Joyce frowned. He said, "Come downstairs and tell me about it. I got a room fixed up downstairs. I'm glad you came to me. I'll lead the way."

We followed him into a reception hall whose elegance could not be dampened even by the semi-darkness. We walked after our guide through a streamlined kitchen and to the door of the basement. He switched on a light at the head of the stairs, led us down them to a light-filled doorway in the rear of the cellar. He stepped aside and bowed us into his diggings.

I saw a roll-top desk, an easy chair with a footstool before it, a bridge lamp beside it. That was all there was time for me to see before the door banged shut behind me. I wheeled around. It had not been a draft that slammed shut the door. Jeff and I were alone in the room. Frank Lorimer's friend, Eddie Joyce, was out in the corridor. Jeff flung himself at the door. He was too late. Joyce had already shot a bolt into its lock.

We turned away from the door. The other three walls were smooth, unbroken by any door or window. The bulb overhead and the bridge lamp by the easy chair flickered and went out.

We stood there in the cold, damp darkness. The silence was hardly disturbed by the slopping shuffle of footsteps coming back to the door, then on by it.

"Joyce!" shouted Jeff.

The footsteps moved away and were gone.

5

"JEFF," I SAID, "WHERE ARE YOU?"

"By the door."

"What are you doing?"

"Seeing if Joyce left a key under the mat for us."

"Don't be sarcastic. I thought you might possibly be doing something about getting us out of this pitch-black hellhole."

"Have you got a match, Haila?"

"No. But I've got a cigarette."

Jeff swore at me.

"Darling," I said, "don't tell me that you haven't any matches!"

Jeff swore at himself.

"Well," I said, "if you had the grace to carry that lighter I gave you for your birthday . . ." I was interrupted by a thud. "Jeff, what was that?"

"Me. I'm trying to knock down the door."

"With what?"

"My shoulder."

"Try again."

"It's useless."

"You have to do it three times. The door will fly open the third time."

"Sweetheart," Jeff said, "if you don't stop being cheerful, I'll . . . by God, I'll walk right out on you. I won't stay in this room another minute with you."

"I was just trying to keep our morale up."

I heard Jeff prowling cautiously around the room. He said, "There must be some way to get out of here."

"No," I said. "Eddie Joyce looked very competent. Did you notice what a fine job he did shoveling snow? Eddie's an all-around man. We're in here to stay."

"That's keeping our morale up."

"Jeff. . . ."

"Yes?"

"We'll probably be kept here until the woman is murdered, won't

we? We won't be hurt. But the woman will be dead."

Jeff didn't answer me. He kept shuffling blindly around the room, frantically feeling for a way out. At last he gave up and the room was still, still as the bottom of a well on a deserted farm. We could hear nothing, not even the noise of the traffic outside. I groped my way to the chair before the roll-top desk and sat down. There was nothing else to do.

Sitting there I found out about time. I found out that it wasn't just clocks and the sun that told you time. It was seeing things happen, doing things yourself. You knew it took fifteen minutes to wash and dry dishes for two, ten minutes to walk to the corner and back. It took just a few minutes to watch a man sweep a sidewalk. But when you were motionless in utter blackness you had no way of telling time.

"Jeff," I said, "how long have we been in here?"

"Fifteen minutes, I'd guess."

"I'd guess an hour at least."

"Haila, it'll be all right. We'll get out. The people who own this house will probably come back from Florida in the spring."

"This house," I said, "wasn't boarded up because somebody went to Florida. They'll be gone for years."

"They might, yes. But on the other hand this joint might be torn down soon to build an apartment house. The wreckers will find us."

"How will we look?"

"Emaciated but undaunted."

"I'd rather be daunted and not emaciated. Oh, Jeff!"

"Stop it, Haila. Do something to keep yourself occupied. Make a pet out of a rat."

Jeff started prowling again. I could hear him circling the room. I could hear his hands sliding over the walls, struggling with the door, then moving again on plaster and concrete and woodwork. He went on and on until the monotony of the sound hypnotized me into a mental vacuum. When I heard him speak his voice was sharp, as if this were the second time he had said my name. I jumped to my feet.

"Yes, Jeff?"

"I help me here."

"What is it?"

"This old bookcase. It weighs a ton. I want you to help me move it." I stretched my hands out before me and walked along the beam of Jeff's voice. "I think there might be something behind it. It isn't quite flush with the wall. Maybe the woodwork of a door frame is blocking it." The tips of my fingers touched Jeff. "Go up to the other end, Haila."

I felt my way along the massive, grotesquely carved piece of furniture. I found a crevice between it and the wall that was large enough for me to slide my flattened hand into.

I said, "Jeff, we can never move this."

"Reach as high as you can. We'll try to tilt it. Ready?"

I pushed and nothing happened. I strained until red spots danced in the darkness before my eyes. I was about to give up when the top of the bookcase began to inch forward. Then I gave it all I had left and the thing began to topple. Jeff yelled timber and I jumped back. There was the crackle of shattering glass, the tearing sound of splintering wood and a booming bang as the full weight of the case hit the floor. A cloud of dust billowed up into my face.

Turning to the wall, I put my hands on it and started toward Jeff. He beat me to the discovery. His yelp of triumph came a moment before I touched the woodwork of the door frame. Hinges squeaked as Jeff wrenched the door open. It bounced off my shoulder and I found it with my hands. It was a small door; its top was a little above my head, its bottom a little below my waist. Jeff's groan confirmed my pessimism.

"Jeff, it's a closet, isn't it?"

"Yes," he moaned. He was disgusted. "Want to hang up your hat and coat?" His voice rose suddenly in a shout. "Wait a minute! Ropes! Yeah! Haila, this is a dumb-waiter! It's an abandoned dumb-waiter!"

Jeff was apparently pulling on a rope. High above us I could hear a rattle, like the sound of a cart in its tracks. The rattle was growing fainter. "Wrong rope," Jeff said. Then the car began moving downward. In a few minutes there was a thump and our way out stood waiting before us.

Jeff found my elbow. "Get in, Haila."

"Me?"

"I'll pull you up."

"That's awfully kind of you, but . . ."

"Would you rather be down here alone for a few minutes or up there alone?"

"Well," I said, "I know what's down here. Couldn't I pull you up? Then you could use the stairs and open this room for me. I'd appreciate that, Jeff."

"We've both got to use the dumb-waiter. Joyce took the key to this door with him. I heard him take it."

"Thorough chap, isn't he? I wonder how he happened to miss this dumb-waiter."

"I imagine," Jeff said, "that the bookcase has been hiding it longer than he's been caretaker here. Get in, Haila."

Jeff loaded me into the thing, more quickly than carefully. I bumped both elbows, soundly knocked my head. When I finally got settled I was sitting with my knees up under my chin, my feet twisted at the wrong angle to my ankles. Something sharp dug into my back. The dust I had stirred up from the floor of the cart sent me into a fit of sneezing.

Jeff said, "The trip will do you good."

"I'm not sure. I've never ridden in a dumb-waiter before. Maybe I get sick in a dumb-waiter."

"Keep feeling the wall for the opening on the first floor," Jeff said. "Here you go."

It was a bumpy take-off, but soon Jeff had me moving smoothly and steadily upward. I tried to find the rope to help him pull, but it was in a trough and inaccessible to me. Then I remembered that I was to watch for the first floor exit from the dumb-waiter. I gingerly let the tips of my fingers glide along the wall at my right. A splinter got me in the pinkie and when I went back to the wall again I used my knuckles. There are tricks to every trade.

Jeff's voice moaned up through the shaft like the wind in a chimney. "Drop me a card when you get there, for God's sake."

"Am I heavy, dear? So sorry."

My knuckles flipped over the jutting of a sill and I felt the coolness of a metal door. I shouted whoa to Jeff, shoved open the door and stepped out into the musty darkness of what I hoped was a room with a floor in it. My feet touched hard wood. I called down to Jeff.

"Take it away."

The cart dropped rapidly down to the cellar and I could hear Jeff boarding it.

"Haila!" he called. "I can't help you pull me up."

"I know you can't, but don't worry."

I hopped up and, grasping the rope as high as I could reach, hung onto it. It jerked down a few inches and stopped. My feet dangled in the air. There was a loud thump below. Jeff yelped in pain.

"Haila, wrong rope! I want to go up!"

"Did I hurt you, dear?"

"Considerably. Damn it, you'd think you'd never pulled a man up in a dumb-waiter before."

I found the right rope and tugged on it, carefully and tenderly, thoughtful of my love below. Nothing happened. I pulled harder. Still nothing happened. I stopped to investigate.

"Jeff, have you invited somebody in there with you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I can't budge this thing!"

"You haven't given yourself a fair chance. Try again."

"Yes, dear."

"There," Jeff said, "now it ought to be easier."

"What did you do, darling?"

"I threw away an old letter and a comb I had in my pocket. I'm ready now."

I grabbed the rope, gritted my teeth and yanked. My super-human effort was rewarded. Slowly, Jeff began to rise. My arms were beginning to leave their sockets when Jeff called.

"Take it easy, Haila."

Gratefully, I took it easy. I let go of the rope and massaged my fingers back into shape. I got out my gloves and put them on. I began to breathe instead of gasp.

Jeff said, "Okay, Haila."

"Okay, hell. I need some more rest."

Jeff didn't answer me; he let me take my time.

In a moment I was ready and I went back to work. It was easier now. Some muscles, dormant since my high school basket ball days, came into play. The gloves helped, too. I gave that rope the gun. The top of the cart breezed past my ear and mine was a job well done.

"All right, Jeff," I said, "get out. If you're not too exhausted."

He didn't answer.

"Jeff!" I said.

I put my hands into the dumb-waiter. It was empty.

Slowly, I stepped back. I was stunned. Things like this didn't happen in the twentieth century, except perhaps in unexplored parts of Tibet and India. But this was New York. A man couldn't vanish in mid-air from a sealed dumb-waiter. Not even Jeff, with all his strange and useless talents, could do that.

But he had; he was gone.

Suddenly the house became a horrible, outré thing. I knew now why it was boarded up. It wasn't because its tenants had found it convenient to leave. They had fled the place.

I turned, trying to pierce the stifling darkness, trying to find an escape from the room. I could see nothing. But I had heard something. Somewhere in the house footsteps were sounding on bare floor, footsteps the like of which I had never heard. They weren't human footsteps. One was a flat slap, the next a whispering scrape, then the slap and the whisper of the scrape. They were coming closer. I thanked heaven that it was too dark for me to see.

A voice said, "Haila."

It knew my name.

"Haila, where the hell are you?"

"Jeff!" I screamed. "Jeff, it's you!"

"Sure."

"Why are you walking that way?"

"My foot went to sleep in the dumb-waiter." He stamped it vigorously on the floor. "It'll be all right in a second."

"Put your arm around me, Jeff."

"What's wrong?"

"I pulled up the dumb-waiter. You weren't in it."

"I got out on the first floor. You could have, too, if you'd been paying attention and found the door."

"Oh," I said. "Listen, why didn't you tell me you were getting out? A girl likes to know those things."

"I told you to stop."

"I thought you meant for me to rest. But it's all right. It's all right, all right. Let's get out of this house."

I held onto Jeff's arm as he led me down two flights of stairs. He kicked the improvised front door from under the hasp of its padlock and we went out into the blinding blessed light that bounced off the

white of the snow. Jeff started walking fast; he seemed to know where he was going and what he was going to do when he got there. I trailed along, a half step behind him.

6

THE DOWNSTAIRS HALL FLOOR OF the house on Bolton Street was getting what it needed; a good scrubbing. It wasn't being done by the landlady, but by a middle-aged, vigorous, chunky woman whom we had never seen before. As Jeff and I opened the front door and walked past the room that had been Frank Lorimer's, she leaned on her hands and looked inquiringly up at us from all fours.

"We'd like to see the landlady," Jeff said.

"I ain't the landlady," the woman said.

"I know you're not," Jeff said.

"I'm from around the corner. I'm just doin' Mrs. Loerch a favor. I'm an old friend of hers."

"We'd like to see Mrs. Loerch," Jeff said again.

"She ain't here," the woman said, as if that was something we should have known. "That's why I'm here. Mrs. Loerch was called away and I'm takin' charge until she gets back."

"Well," Jeff said. "It was pretty sudden, wasn't it?"

"No more than an hour ago. Mrs. Loerch come to me and told me that her sister-in-law was took sick bad and she had to go and help out. She asked me to take charge here and that's what I'm doin'."

"Where does her sister-in-law live?"

"Boston."

"Where in Boston?" Jeff asked. "Did she leave you an address?"

"Yes, she did. She don't expect to be gone long, but if she is I'm to collect the rents and send them on to Boston. In care of General Delivery, Boston."

"I see," Jeff said. "General Delivery."

"That's right. Did Mrs. Loerch promise you two a room?"

"No, it was something else. Did you ever, by any chance, meet Mrs. Loerch's sister-in-law?"

"I never been to Boston."

"I thought she might have visited Mrs. Loerch."

"Maybe she did, I don't know. But I never met her." The woman dipped her brush into the bucket and slubbed some water on the floor. She began scrubbing. "You come back when Mrs. Loerch comes back."

"What's Mrs. Loerch's brother's name?"

"Huh? Her brother?"

"The sister-in-law's husband."

The woman wiped up the wet square of scrubbed floor with a rag, then stood. She picked up the bucket. "I don't know his name. Come to think of it, I never heard Mrs. Loerch mention a brother until this morning."

"And you two are old friends," Jeff said.

She nodded thoughtfully, then shrugged. "Mrs. Loerch always was close-mouthed. Excuse me, I got to get myself clean water."

"Wait a minute," Jeff said. "Did you know Frank Lorimer?"

"Frank who?"

"Lorimer. He was one of Mrs. Loerch's tenants."

"I never knew none of her tenants. She always come over and set in my kitchen." The woman moved away from us toward a flight of stairs to the cellar. "Excuse me, I got to get my water."

She lowered herself rheumatically down the steps and out of our sight. I looked at Jeff. He pushed his hat up off his forehead and looked down at me.

I said, "Mrs. Loerch has scammed."

"I didn't expect that," Jeff said.

"You knew she was in on it. It was she who tricked us into going up to see Eddie Joyce."

"Yes, but we were to be taken care of there, immobilized. Mrs. Loerch left before we got out of the cellar. She doesn't know we got out. Maybe no one knows yet. But Mrs. Loerch is gone. What was she afraid of?" I couldn't answer Jeff's question; in desperation he undertook it himself. "Somebody might have followed us when we went to the police. They might have been afraid that after we disappeared the police would get at Mrs. Loerch. So they suggested that she leave town."

"Somebody's being very thorough," I said. "It's organized."

"It's an organization."

"You mean there are more people in it than Joyce and Mrs. Loerch?"

"I'm guessing," Jeff said. "But the landlady doesn't look as if she's the brains of the outfit. And I doubt that Joyce is."

"Somebody's giving them instructions."

"I wish," Jeff said, "that we had bought a morning paper on the way down here. To see if the body of a woman has been found."

"Don't be pessimistic. Let's look at Frank Lorimer's room again."

The old man's room, at first glance, seemed unchanged since our visit of the night before. Its dingy sparseness appeared undisturbed. Then I saw that the room had a straightened-up look about it, like a hotel room made ready for its next guest. Jeff had seen that, too. He was walking quickly toward the wardrobe.

The few shabby clothes were no longer there. The shelf had been cleared. The wardrobe was completely empty. Jeff yanked open the drawers of the battered bureau, then he circled the room in a minute tour of investigation. It was bare of anything that belonged to anyone. It was a furnished room, now unoccupied. It might have been waiting for a tenant for a week, a month or a year. This morning it told us nothing; in the event that the police called it would not tell them that, up until the day before, it had been the room where Frank Lorimer had lived.

"Nice work," Jeff said.

"Don't start admiring this pack of murderers. You'll get an inferiority complex. And there's a lady somewhere who needs you to be at your best."

We heard the rhythmic bang of a brush against woodwork. Mrs. Loerch's old friend was doing the cellar steps. I could see that Jeff was thinking about her. Then he dismissed her and returned his attention to the room. He looked at the bed, the two chairs, the bureau, the fireplace. He looked at the garish-framed calendar pictures over the mantle, at a faded photograph over the head of the bed. Mrs. Loerch's attempt at interior decoration was at most half-hearted.

"Let's go," I suggested. "There's nothing more we can do here."

Apparently the photographer in Jeff drew him to the picture over the bed. With one knee on the worn spread he leaned forward and peered at it. He took it down and carried it to a window. I followed him. Over his shoulder I looked at the photograph.

It was a carefully posed picture, not a casual snapshot. A hansom cab, sleek and luxurious, stood behind a horse that seemed proud to be its locomotion. At the horse's head, standing at attention, was a coachman, every inch a coachman from boots to high hat.

"Frank Lorimer," Jeff said.

He put the picture in my hand. I tilted it to catch all the light that seeped through the grimy window. I studied the face of the coachman. The man was somewhere in his fifties. He was straight and still strong-looking, his face had only the suggestion of wrinkles. But there was no doubt it was a picture of Frank Lorimer.

"Yes," I said.

Jeff took the picture from me, broke it out of its frame, put it in his overcoat pocket.

"Let's go," he said.

I didn't have to ask him where we were going.

A half hour later we were hurrying around the snow bedecked fountain in the Plaza before the hotel of the same name. To our right Fifth Avenue had already been dug out and the snow spirited away. Ahead of us Central Park took off from Fifty-ninth Street for One Hundred and Tenth. We crossed Fifty-ninth to the row of six or seven hansom cabs that stood at the curb and waited for people who had five dollars to spend on a ride through the white wonderland that was Central Park this morning.

The group of coachmen stopped chatting together and perked up at our purposeful approach. Each and every one of them was a study in applied nostalgia. They were strictly characters by Dickens, quaint as olde England at its merriest. They were ruddy and jolly and their red noses poked out between the brims of their ponderous high hats and the great, seedy fur collars of their great, engulfing, brass-buttoned coats.

"Gentlemen!" Jeff said. I expected him to add, "God rest ye." But he didn't. He took the picture of Frank Lorimer from his pocket and handed it to the nearest of the coachmen. "This man used to work with you, as you can see. I need some information about him and I thought you might give it to me."

The photograph went the rounds. Each man took a look at it, shook his head, passed it on, and then it was back in Jeff's hands again.

"C'mon, boys," Jeff pleaded. "You aren't trying."

The eldest of the boys spoke up. "I been here driving a cab for more than twenty years. I never saw that fellow."

"Maybe it's a bad likeness," another said. "What's his name?"

"It's a good likeness," Jeff said, "but his name is Frank Lorimer."

"Frank Lorimer," one of them said.

They all said Frank Lorimer then, slowly, rolling it around in their mouths, tasting it. But they all shook their heads. The name meant nothing to them. The man who had first seen the picture eased it out of Jeff's hands and studied it again.

"Somethin' about this," he said, "seems familiar to me."

"The horse?" Jeff said. "Do you recognize the horse?"

"Never seen the horse."

He glanced over at the row of hansoms and back at the picture. Jeff and I crowded close to him and did the same thing. We all got it at once.

"That's my cab," the man said.

The picture went the rounds once more and everybody agreed that the hansom in the picture was the hansom now being driven by Tom Markey. Tom took this as a bit of glory; this was something that didn't happen to a man every day. He was all smiles now, and his red nose seemed to glow ten watts more.

"What d'ya know about that?" Tom chuckled. He held the picture at arm's length. "Good likeness."

"Do you own this cab?" Jeff asked.

"No, oh, no," Tom said. "We all rent them. Except Larkins there, he owns his."

"Where do you rent them?"

"Tollman's Stable. On Sixty-third, right off First Avenue."

"They might be able to help me," Jeff said.

"Wouldn't be surprised," Tom said. "Talk to old Tollman himself."

"Thanks," Jeff said.

"Say, young fellow," Tom said.

"Yes?"

"Mind if I keep this picture of my cab?"

"Right now I need it. But I'll see that you get a copy."

"I'd appreciate it if you would."

"I will," Jeff promised.

We thanked everybody again, said good-by and lit out for Toll-

man's Stable. We couldn't find a taxi. We walked across Fifth Avenue and over to Madison in search of one. There we decided to take a crosstown bus to First Avenue. Jeff whistled a merry tune while we waited.

I, too, felt fine. Actually, it wasn't much. Locating a man who owned a hansom cab that was driven years ago by a man who knew the name of a woman who was slated to be murdered was still a long way from finding that woman. But it was something, a little something. After hours and hours of nothing but high, thick, stone walls it was worth whistling about. I joined Jeff, supplying some doubtful harmony to his doubtful melody of that recorded cantata in praise of Piel's light beer of Broadway fame.

I looked at Jeff; he had stopped whistling.

He put his hand on my arm. "It's all right to look now," he said. "Across the street. On the corner."

Across the street, on the corner, his head turned in profile against the wind while he lit a cigarette, was Eddie Joyce. He got his cigarette going. He took a deep drag and let all the smoke come out of his nose. He flipped his coat collar up closer to the brim of his hat and turned toward us. By the time his eyes reached us we were studiously looking at each other.

"He can't be following us," I said. "How could he have found us?"

"He must have discovered that we were gone right after we got out of the cellar. He knew we'd go back to Frank's rooming house, it was the only place for us to go. He picked us up there."

I glanced back at Joyce. He had found a spot in a shop doorway that was a nice place from which to watch us. I could tell from his nonchalance that he didn't know yet that we had spotted him.

"Haila," Jeff said, "you go to the stable."

"You mean we'll separate?"

"Yes. Joyce will follow me. I'll take care of him; you take care of old man Tollman. Show him the picture. Find out anything you can about Frank."

"All right."

Jeff casually turned his back to Joyce's side of the street and slipped the picture to me. I slid it quickly into my purse.

I said, "How will we get together again?"

"Let's see . . . it probably should be in this part of town. The Waldorf. The Park Avenue lobby of the Waldorf. Go there as soon as

you can. If you have to wait long for me, ask for a message at the desk. I'll try to get word to you."

"Jeff, what might happen to you?"

He laughed at me. "Just wait till you see the other guy."

We walked to the Madison Avenue curb. For five minutes we unsuccessfully hailed taxis while we ignored Mr. Joyce. At last a cab stopped for us and Jeff handed me into it. He told the driver to take me down Madison. He winked cheerfully at me and closed the door.

I watched him as he started west of Fifty-ninth, then the cab moved me past the edge of the corner building. I looked through the rear window, but other cars blocked my view of Joyce's nook.

"Driver," I said, "make that the corner of First Avenue and Sixty-third."

"Right," he said, and smiled at me in the mirror. "Hold on, lady, I'm on my way home for lunch."

He used Fifty-seventh Street to get to First Avenue, then turned uptown, chattering all the while about what a wonderful cook his wife was. It was all I could do to keep my mind on old Mr. Tollman and plan my procedure with him. Jeff had given me a job to do; I mustn't muff it.

My driver was racing along so enthusiastically that when we flashed across Sixty-second Street without slowing down I thought he had misunderstood my directions. I told him again. He grinned at me in the mirror and pulled the cab to such a sudden stop at the corner that my head nearly took off from the rest of me.

I heard the squeal of brakes behind us. Another cab swerved to the side to avoid piling into us. Its driver's face was red with fury. At first I thought his passenger had been thrown to the floor. Then I saw that he was only hunched down in the seat, his head ducked out of view.

I told my driver to get going. As we began moving I leaned back sideways into the corner, glanced out of the rear window. The cab behind started after us.

Joyce was following me, not Jeff. He was all mine; whether I liked it or not, he was my baby.

7

JOYCE'S TAXI WAS HAVING NO trouble at all staying with us. It was a half-block behind, cruising easily along in our wake. I leaned forward and spoke to my driver.

"I'm being followed," I said. "I don't want to be followed. I'll give you ten dollars if you get away from that cab behind us."

I saw the man hunch forward over the steering wheel, his back stiffened for action. He jerked the car to the right and expertly manouevered it between two delivery trucks and into the curb. He shut off his motor.

"Sorry, lady," he said. "This is where you get out."

"What?" I wasn't sure that I had heard him correctly.

"I'm not interested in ten bucks."

"Mister," I said, "you don't understand. I have to get away from that man. It's important." I put my hands on the back of the driver's seat. I wanted him to see that they were trembling. "That man mustn't catch me. I . . . I don't know what he'll do."

The driver kept his face straight front. He said, "I don't want any part of any trouble. I just got married."

"But you can't throw me out here, right into his lap! You've got to——"

"I'm sorry," he said woodenly. "I got responsibilities. If I got in a jam, what would happen to Alice?"

He settled stubbornly in his seat. I saw that there was no use arguing. I gave the bridegroom a dollar. Quickly I pushed open the cab door, started through it and then stopped. I looked for Joyce. I couldn't find him, couldn't spot his cab. If I couldn't see him, maybe he couldn't see me. I forced myself to jump to the sidewalk. I ran directly across it and darted into a butcher shop.

The store was crowded with customers. One of them was talking to the butcher, shouting to make herself heard above the roar of an ailing meat grinder. The butcher was an amiable man, interested in his work. It was nice being here, nice and warm and comforting. Everything was normal, business as usual. Nothing could happen to me here.

I stayed at the door end of the narrow store and kept my eyes on the street. With the help of the huge mirror behind the counter I was able to see in both directions. There was no sign of Joyce. But I decided to wait another few minutes. Then a minute more.

Then I couldn't stay any longer. I couldn't loiter in the butcher shop indefinitely. I had work to do. Jeff was counting on me. I edged to the door; I took a deep breath and plunged out onto the sidewalk. Joyce was gone.

I ran. I was quickly off that block and on my way to Tollman's Stable. Jeff, when he discovered that he wasn't being followed, would undoubtedly go there. I had to stop for a light at Sixty-fourth. A gust of cold wind threw a swirl of gutter-soiled snow at my face and I wheeled away from it. I was looking across First Avenue and directly at Joyce. He was ambling along the opposite sidewalk. For a moment we were staring straight into each other's eyes.

I pivoted and left First Avenue, walked rapidly west along Sixty-fourth. The least I could do, I thought, was to lead Joyce away from Tollman's Stable and lose him in some remote, unimportant, to us, part of town. Then I thought again. Jeff hadn't planned to lose Joyce. He was too valuable to discard. He was our only direct link to the murder plan; he should be used to lead us to its chief engineer. Somehow I had to reverse matters as they stood now. Somehow I had to trick Joyce into a position where I was following him.

At Second Avenue I glanced over my shoulder. Joyce was still with me. Now he was making no attempt at concealment. I might have imagined it, but he seemed almost to grin at me. I didn't grin back. Ahead of me, a long block away, was the Third Avenue elevated. That was what I wanted, the El. Now I knew what I was going to do about Mr. Joyce, and I was in a hurry to get it done.

There was just a scattering of people on the stairs that led up to the Fifty-ninth Street El stop. I went up them quickly, as though I were running for the train that was pulling in. But I didn't go near the train; instead I walked straight through the uptown platform and down the other flight of stairs. That, of course, didn't throw Joyce for a second. I hadn't meant it to. But I acted as if I thought I had lost him. I looked pleased with myself, I relaxed. I was a girl who had just done a very clever thing and now had not a fear in the world.

Unhurriedly, I crossed the street, climbed to the downtown El

platform. In a few minutes when the train came in I boarded it. Not once did I look for Joyce. He was somewhere on the train, somewhere where he could watch me. I didn't have to check on that; I could feel it.

I kept my eyes on the advertisements above me. One of them caused me to make a slight alteration in my plans. I had been on my way to Klein's on Union Square, but this ad convinced me that I should go to Klingman's, Klothes for Ladies, on Fourteenth Street, just twenty steps from fashionable Fifth Avenue.

Klingman's turned out to be just what I needed. They had everything for milady from tip to toe. It took me only a few minutes of window shopping to make sure of that; it took only a few seconds to make sure surreptitiously that Joyce was still with me. He was across Fourteenth Street, half-hidden by a parked car. He had apparently decided to keep me from knowing that I had not lost him. My little deception, with any luck, was about to pay off.

Immediately, I had a stroke of that luck. Klingman's first counter was laden with all shapes and colors of "Sno-Glasses." I bought a pair of fancy Harlequins and went on to the rear of the store. I had only thirty-two dollars with me, but I made it do, including the fur coat.

The long racks of furs fascinated me. There were lapin dyed leopards, lapin dyed mink, lapin dyed sable, lapin dyed beaver—almost everything except lapin dyed rabbit, and they were all genuine lapin and sensationally priced at \$19.95. I was stymied finally between the mink and the sable. I tried them both on; the saleslady told me frankly that the sable did more for me. I took the sable.

The hat I found might have been designed for my coat. It was two dollars and ninety cents, which I thought a little high, but the saleslady told me frankly that it did a great deal for me and, furthermore, it was genuine felt. The high heeled pumps with the cut brass buckles were four-eighty, and now I was complete.

The saleslady showed me a cubicle of a dressing room. I handed my tweed coat and hat and brogues to her. She left me to have them wrapped.

First I put on the ultra-high heels; they increased my height two inches. I broke the blue glass out of the blue-rimmed Harlequins and donned them. I swept my hair to the top of my head and sealed it there with my new hat. I rouged my cheeks with lipstick and made

myself a super-Hollywood mouth, larger than life and luscious as a wax plum. I slipped into my sables; they were a little short for me. I pulled my dress up three inches and belted it there. I inspected myself in the mirror.

It wasn't I. I wouldn't have known myself from Eve; I wouldn't have recognized myself in a million years, and there was small chance that Joyce would.

I was ready to go.

The saleslady gawked at my new face when she gave me my package of old clothes, but I didn't enlighten her. I walked blithely out of the store and, without even a glance across the street toward the man for whom I had gone to all this trouble, I turned right to Fifth Avenue. I threw myself into my part. I was a Miss Somebody from Someplace, New Jersey, in town for a day's shopping. I tried to look as though I were on my way to Schrafft's for a soda and a cigarette. When I got to the corner I would reconnoiter, locate Joyce and slip into a position to follow him.

Then I nearly dropped in my tracks. Joyce had moved from across the street. He was standing not ten feet in front of me, leaning against a jeweler's window, smoking a cigarette butt so small it should have burnt his fingers. His eyes were fastened on me, but fortunately not on my face, not looking past my disguise. They were on my ankles which were now propped up on shiny, four-eighths, two-inch pedestals. They moved up to my knees and . . . they stopped there, stayed there. I tried to keep my knees from knocking together.

I walked on. I was getting away with it. I was directly in front of Joyce now and he, bless his heart, still hadn't lost interest in my gams. This was very flattering, but rather unnerving. I was a half step by him, a half step from victory, when a pudgy hand grabbed at my elbow and swung me around. A woman, buxom and overpowering, was beaming at me.

"Tessie!" she exclaimed. "Tessie Franken! How are you?"

My back was toward Joyce. I could have kicked up a heel and touched him on his shin. He couldn't help hearing the woman. He would hear my voice. If I denied that I was Tessie Franken it would be a much more arresting conversation than if we were just Tessie Franken and an old friend meeting unexpectedly. I camouflaged my voice.

"Hello, yourself!" I said. "What are you doin' on Fourteenth Street? Of all places!"

"Why, Tessie! I work on Fourteenth!"

I giggled. "I'm always kiddin'!" Behind me I heard Joyce suck greedily at his cigarette butt. My voice went up a half octave. "You know better than to take me serious!"

"You never used to be always kiddin', Tessie," the woman said. "I guess Earl has done you a lot of good. Why, I hardly recognized you. Of course, it's been years."

"Years and years practically," I admitted. Smoke from Joyce's cigarette drifted over my shoulder. I tried to adjourn the meeting. "Why don't you mosey up to the house some night after work? After all!"

"I just might," Tessie's friend said. "I don't see how Earl could still hold that grudge against me."

"Earl hold a grudge? No! When it comes to holdin' a grudge Earl is a regular butterfingers. Which way you goin'? Walk me to Fifth Avenue." I took the woman's arm and tugged her along with me, away from Joyce. I could feel his eyes on me like runs in my stocking. "Tell me," I babbled, "how's tricks?"

"Oh, I can't complain. Tessie, you put on some weight, didn't you?"

I giggled and didn't say anything.

"Tessie!" the woman cried joyfully. "Don't tell me!"

"Yes," I breathed ecstatically. We were almost to the corner. "Yes, indeedy."

"When?"

"Next November."

"Can you beat it! You want a boy or a girl, Tessie?"

"One or the other."

"Tessie, did you say next November?" The woman wanted to stop, but I urged her along. "Next November it's ten months."

"I know," I said. "I believe in long pregnancies."

"What? What did you say?"

We were at the corner; I pulled her around it. Now I was in a hurry. "Scram," I said to the woman out of the corner of my mouth.

She gaped at me. "Huh?"

"And if you ever show your kisser at our house, I'll have Earl

beat your brains out. Of all the nerve! Tellin' me I'm gettin' fat. Scram."

I ran to the curb and across Fourteenth Street. On the other side I slowed down to a walk. Joyce was still where I had left him. He thought that I was still in the store. I was doing all right; in fact, I was doing fine. Jeff would be proud of me.

I hid behind the same car that Joyce had used for the same purpose a half hour before. I relaxed and lit myself a cigarette. Now it was his turn to worry and he was beginning to do just that. He walked past the store several times, peering through its glass doors. At last he went in; in a few moments he came stamping back out. He was perplexed and angry. He stood for a minute, gnawing at a knuckle. Then he made a decision. He started rapidly down the street toward Union Square. I followed him.

Halfway down the block he abruptly right-faced and darted into a cigar store. Carefully I crept up on the place, toward its wide window, and I nearly outwitted myself. He was standing just behind the window, in one of the row of telephone booths that used the glass for a fourth wall. I saw him dial the last two digits of his number.

I went quickly into the cigar store and slid into the empty booth just behind Joyce's. The side of the booth didn't quite meet the plate glass of the window and though the crack I could hear his words clearly.

"I'll pick her up again, don't worry. I'll find her." His voice rose in anger in response to something that was said at the other end of the wire. "I know I better and I will! Stop crying about it!" Then he lowered his voice. "When is it?" He listened and he was angry again. "It damn well is my business to know! Maybe I'll screw it up if I don't." I could hear his heavy breathing as he listened to what it was his business to know. "Why so late?" he asked. "What are you waiting for? The whole damn world can end before eleven tomorrow morning!" He heard something then that made him laugh, a nasty, chuckling laugh. He said, "That's right, you're right."

I heard him hang up. The door of his booth squealed as he opened it. When he stepped past me, within twelve inches of me, my back was to him as I bent close to the mouthpiece of my phone. I stayed where I was.

Eleven o'clock tomorrow morning. It could mean only one thing.

The way he had said it, the voice he had used as he had said it, made it mean but one thing. It was a death sentence. Jeff and I had less than twenty-four hours to find out for whom, three hours less than twenty-four. We would have to do better than we had been doing.

I glanced out the window beside me. Joyce was crossing the street. He disappeared into a huge cafeteria on the opposite side. I ran after him.

He hadn't seated himself. He was standing at the beverage station drinking a cup of coffee. I was through the revolving doors and into the place before I saw that. It was too late then for me to back out. I sidled along the front wall away from the door and watched him from there. He drank a second cup of coffee, as quickly as if it were a glass of cold water. He turned toward the door. His eyes took in the vast field of crowded tables, but I had dropped into the only empty chair in sight, putting a big man eating vegetable soup in front of me. I didn't entirely trust my disguise. A few minutes before Joyce had seen and heard a girl in a mock sable coat and blue Harlequins talking to a friend. The coincidence of seeing her again might attract his attention. I couldn't afford to take any chances; I mustn't let my success make me careless.

The revolving doors spun behind him. I would have to hurry. It was a long way to the door, and it took me too long to get to it, through it. Joyce had been swallowed by the crowd on the sidewalk. Frantically, I started toward Fifth Avenue. It was no use. I reversed myself, running back past the cafeteria. I ran to the corner, across Broadway, and I pulled up just in time. Another ten steps and I would have raced past him.

Diana, or some other goddess of the chase, was with me. Joyce had stopped at a kiosk to buy a newspaper. He had shaken out the front page and was scanning it. Now he folded the paper and stuck it in his overcoat pocket. He started walking, purposefully but not quickly, toward Fourth Avenue. I kept twenty-five yards behind him.

I followed him down Fourth to Thirteenth Street, along Thirteenth to Third, across Third. At Second I nearly lost him again. It was pure, idiot luck that I didn't. I misjudged the traffic and the lights. A bunched line of huge trailer trucks was across my path, moving too fast for me to dart between. I stood there helplessly while Joyce walked away from me. I gritted my teeth and

darted in front of a truck. I felt a fender flick my flying coat, the driver shouted profanely at me. But I was across the street, looking at Joyce and thanking my lucky star.

He had turned off Thirteenth Street and started down Second Avenue. It was only because he had stopped to light a cigarette that I was able to spot him. He had stepped into a doorway out of the wind and that was the break I had needed. I swore that I wouldn't need another. I wouldn't lose him again.

I moved along behind him. When he turned onto Twelfth Street I crossed to the far side so that I could be closer to him without his becoming aware of me. Then, abruptly, he turned and walked into a house in the middle of the block. It was a rooming house; I could tell from the decrepit sign swinging from a pipe over the door. I ran across the street and into the vestibule of the house.

I stopped before the inner door and peered through the dirty glass and the dirtier curtain over it. The hall was empty. I eased open the door inch by inch. It must make no sound. On tiptoe I moved to the bottom of the stairs. From a skylight far above a gray, cheerless light fell on the worn gray stairway and the flaking brown walls of the stairwell. I stood still, listening, and above me a door slammed. The bang of it was so close to me, just above my head, that I almost screamed. I found myself half-turned toward the street. I had started to run. I put my hands on the newel post and held on tight.

I couldn't lose control now. Joyce was in a room one flight of stairs above me. In ten seconds I could be at that door. He would be talking to someone, possibly saying things that I should hear. He might even say a name, a name I needed desperately to hear. The name of a woman.

I put my hand on the balustrade and eased my foot onto the first step. I must be careful now. It had been luck that had brought me this far, nothing else. It had been sheer luck that Joyce had stopped to buy a newspaper, more luck that he had stopped to light a cigarette.

My right foot was on the fifth step, but I couldn't put my weight on it. I stood there unable to move, paralyzed.

I knew then that it wasn't luck that I had followed him to this house. I had been carefully, skillfully lured into it. The cigarette, the newspaper—they were accidents. They were parts of the trap

into which I had fallen. Somewhere, probably in the cafeteria, Joyce had seen and recognized me. Somewhere right above me he was waiting for me now.

My eyes were on a level with the second floor. There was no sound, no movement there. I searched the hallway as far as I could see without moving. There was nothing there, nothing but two blobs of black protruding from the niche a doorway made. Flattened against that door, almost lost in the murky light, was Joyce.

Without turning, I lowered my foot to the step beneath me. The black shoes hadn't moved. I took another backward step and then another. I eased myself down again, straining for a sound above me.

I heard it then. A quick rush of movement, the pound of heavy steps. But I was already at the door, wrenching it open, shoving against the outer one. I felt the cold, clean air on my face as I raced blindly out into the street.

8

THE WARMTH OF THE WALDORF lobby was a comfort to me, but not quite enough. The well-fed contentment of the people, solid-looking citizens all, was reassuring, but I needed something more. I needed Jeff. I needed him to put an arm around me, to tell me everything was all right, that he would personally see to it that I never again followed a strange man into a strange place. The tremors returned to my solar plexus. I lit a cigarette and used the smoke to blot out the image of a pair of shoes with a man in them, waiting for me to come just a little closer.

Jeff was not in the lobby. In a moment I would go to the desk and ask if there was a message for me. But first I needed the rest of my cigarette to get me back in shape. The ride uptown to the Waldorf hadn't been quite long enough to accomplish that. But now I was safe, I was sound. There was nothing like a Park Avenue hotel lobby to make a girl feel fine again. I took a deep drag on my cigarette, enjoying it.

A voice, hard and cold as steel, spoke into my ear. The man was standing behind me. I started to turn toward him and his hand grasped my arm, held me straight forward. The words came again.

"Get going. Right out that door."

I didn't answer him; I couldn't. My lips were stiff, my mouth suddenly dry as dust.

"Come on, Toots," the voice said softly. "Move."

"No," I whispered. Then I found my weapon. "Let me go or I'll scream. I'll scream until the police come."

The voice laughed. "The police, that's good. I'm the one who'll call the police. Go on now back to Sixth Avenue where you belong. This is out of your territory."

"Out of my . . ." I wrenched myself loose from the man, turned to face him. "What are you talking about? I am waiting for my husband!"

"I know, I know." He smiled mirthlessly at me. "All you girls are waiting for your husbands."

I gasped. If I hadn't gathered what the man meant, the mirror on the wall across the lobby would have told me. I still had on my snazzy Harlequins. The two spots of red stood out on my cheeks like two red lamps. My painted mouth seemed to be saying, "C'mon up, big boy." And my high, high heels and sable coat were exactly what one of the girls would save for a week to buy. I almost wept with shame. I didn't look cute and pixie as I had thought. I looked like the newest apprentice in the oldest profession in the world.

The house detective took my elbow.

"Let's go," he said.

"No!" I cried. "No, I'm not a . . . I'm not a—babe! I am so waiting for my husband! He . . . there he is over there now!"

Jeff, in fact, was there. He was crossing the lobby toward the desk. In my excitement my voice rose.

"That's my husband!" I screeched.

Everyone in the place turned to stare at me, including Jeff. He saw me pointing at him. His eyes widened in horror, not the horror of recognition, but in plain, unadulterated horror. His face flamed with embarrassment.

"Darling!" I screamed.

Jeff turned and fled.

When I caught up to him, he was standing outside the Waldorf, trying to light a cigarette. His hands were trembling. He didn't see me until I was at his side. He recoiled, fell back a step, then recognized me. He fell back three more steps, recoiled some more.

"My God," he said.

He tried to say something else, but he could only moan softly. His attitude irritated me just a little.

"Call a cab," I said coldly.

"You need an ambulance. What happened to you?"

"I'll explain everything in the cab."

"Haila, at least take off those horrible glasses."

I took them off.

"No," Jeff said, "put them back on."

"Here's a cab. Get in."

I held the door open for Jeff, helped him through it. I told the driver to take us up Park Avenue. Jeff leaned forward and spoke earnestly to him.

"Buddy," he said, "believe me. I never saw this woman before in my life. I'm doing a favor for a sick friend."

Sincerely, from the bottom of my heart, I said, "Shut up."

"Haila!" Jeff shouted. "What the hell happened to you?"

"This," I said, "is a disguise."

While I wiped that disguise off my face and put on the one I used every day to fool my husband and friends, I told Jeff how things were with me. He wasn't annoyed that I had so stupidly let Joyce outsmart me. The narrowness of my escape left him too weak for that. He patted my knee; I moved the other one over to be patted, too, but Jeff was looking out through the rear window.

I said, "Joyce never caught up with me. He isn't following us now."

"Haila, you'd better go home."

"Why?"

"I think it would be better if you went home."

"No! Darling, maybe Joyce was just trying to scare me."

"Sure," Jeff said. "That's all."

"But I won't let anything like that happen again. And, Jeff, I did find out something. The time. Eleven o'clock tomorrow morning."

"That was good going, Haila, but . . ."

Jeff was looking out the back window again.

"Darling," I said, "you're the one with the jitters, not I. Nobody is following us. I know I shook Joyce."

Jeff looked at me. "Joyce picked you up when we separated," he said. "Somebody else followed me."

"Somebody else . . . you mean there were two of them? They ganged up on us! Jeff, who is yours, what does he look like? Have we seen him before?"

Jeff shook his head. "I haven't even spotted mine yet, Haila. I don't know who he is."

"Then how do you know he's following you?"

"Haila," Jeff said, "I wish you'd go home. I wish you'd let me handle this. In a little while I'm going down to Headquarters and see Hankins again and—"

"Jeff, what's happened? Something's happened!"

"Yes."

"You weren't going to tell me."

"No, but . . . look, Haila. They killed Frank Lorimer when he got in their way. Joyce would have done the same thing to you."

"But how can you be so sure?"

"Because," he said, "they've already tried to get me."

"Jeff. . . ."

"They took a shot at me."

"Jeff!"

"I'd rather not tell you how close it was."

"The stinkers."

"See, Haila, that's why I want you to go home. The bad company you're keeping is making you use bad language."

"Jeff, when did it happen, how?"

"As soon as I was sure Joyce wasn't following me, I went on to Tollman's Stable myself. When I came out someone was up on a roof across the street. Fortunately, it's awkward carrying rifles around town. It was a tough shot for a revolver. I dug the bullet out of Mr. Tollman's floor. Maybe Hankins would like to see it."

"Don't show it to me. I don't want to see it."

"I wish you'd go home, Haila."

"No," I said. "I won't unless you do."

Jeff was silent. He was trying to think of a way to ditch me. I didn't give him a chance. I said, "Did you learn anything at the stable?"

"I talked to old Tollman himself. He didn't know Frank Lorimer, he couldn't tell me anything about him. But he did tell me about the hansom cab."

"Yes?"

"Tollman bought it years ago from Hiram Kennedy."

"That name," I said, "is familiar."

"Money," Jeff said. "Oh, so much, much money. But the 1929 crash nearly wiped old Hiram out, the poor guy. He died a millionaire. All he had left was a couple of lousy millions."

"And Frank Lorimer was his coachman in the old days?"

"I think he must have been," Jeff said. "But we'll find out for certain at Gramercy Square. The Kennedy town house is still there."

He told the driver to take us to Gramercy Square.

"Jeff," I said, "who are we going to see? You said old Hiram was dead."

"I don't know who we'll see, if anybody. Tollman told me about the house. He doesn't know if there's even anyone in it. And I haven't had time to find out."

I opened the package of my own clothes. I took off the fancy high heels and got into my plain, heavenly brogues. I switched to my old hat. I slipped out of my sables and Jeff enthusiastically helped me into my tweed coat. I rolled the sables up in a ball.

"Jeff," I whispered, "I'm going to leave this fur coat in the cab."

"Go ahead," he said, "but you'll probably be imprisoned for committing a nuisance."

We went straight through Gramercy Square without stopping. Half-way down Irving Place Jeff had our driver make a sudden U-turn and come to an abrupt stop. No car seemed to have been following us. But we walked back to the private, iron-fenced park that formed the Square called Gramercy. We walked slowly twice around the park.

If Joyce had picked me up again, he wasn't letting us know it. If Jeff's shooting acquaintance was watching us, he didn't tip his hand. He might have been any one of the scattering of men walking about the square. He might have been the man reading his newspaper as he sauntered along, or the man so engrossed in the pigeons foraging in the tiny park, or the man talking to the nurse as he patted the tow head of her small charge. He might have been anyone. It wasn't a nice thing knowing that, it wasn't conducive to a feeling of well-being. It was frightening. My hands ached from holding so tight to Jeff's arm.

We headed for the Kennedy place on the eastern side of the square. The house was the eighteen-nineties at their most. It was overweighted with cornices and elaborate stone work that was as practical as a bustle. It made the refaced, modernized building next to it look positively naked and indecent.

Jeff rang the bell a second time. Someone, apparently an ancient, infirm family retainer, needed his help to swing in the great door. A female hand stretched through the widening opening. In it was a dollar bill. Then the hand quickly withdrew.

A female voice laughed and said, "A thousand apologies! I thought you were from the delicatessen."

We could see her now, all of her. She was something to see. Her jet black hair swirled about her round face in that obsolete coiffure, the wind-blown bob. Her eyebrows were thinned to a pencil-line arch, her lashes dripped mascara, her lips were a crimson, carefully-painted cupid's bow. She wore a baby blue cardigan that was taxed to capacity by her bra-ad bosom. She wore a skirt that was too tight and too short, no stockings, pumps with heels higher than the ones I had just discarded because they were dangerous. She was a sweater girl, aged forty.

Jeff, when he could speak, said, "No, we're not from the delicatessen." He sounded as though he were sorry we weren't. "Are you . . . is your name Kennedy?"

"No!" she cried vivaciously. "A thousand times, no!"

"Do any of the Kennedys still live here?"

"My pal, Thelma. You want to talk to Thelma?"

"Yes, we do."

"Well, come in, why don't you? Whatcha standing there for?"

She beckoned us into a great dusky hall that gave the impression of being kept open only because it was a necessary thoroughfare. As she bounced along ahead of us she sang to herself, snapping her fingers rhythmically at her sides. I would have sworn the words to her song were "Boop-boop-a-doop, boop-boop-a-doop." She led us past several closed giant double doors with drifts of dust on their thresholds. We followed her into a large, square room that opened off the end of the long hall.

It seemed to have once been, a long time ago, a dining room. There was a fireplace with a magnificent white marble mantel. Above it, reaching clear to the high ceiling, was a huge mirror with a lovely, gold-leafed frame; before it stood a battered kitchen table that held a

two-burner gas hot plate, now being used to perk some coffee.

There were handsome tapestries on the walls, rich, heavy draperies masked two windows. Taking up almost all one wall was a mammoth Victorian sideboard. It was covered with magazines, a portable phonograph and a stack of records. In a corner was a studio couch, so carelessly made that you could see it was doubling for a bed. This was certainly a house of twenty rooms, but apparently all the living that was done in it was done in this room only.

Across the windows was a long, green and white striped sofa. In each corner of it sat a faded, soiled kewpie doll. Between the two kewpies lolled a woman. Thelma Kennedy.

There seemed to be a contest between the two lady friends to see which could look the younger. As of today it was just about a draw. That possibly explained why these two could remain friends.

Thelma was slightly older, but she tried harder than her pal. Her hair-do was a frivolous concoction that dripped bangs almost into her eyes. Her make-up was so excessive that I began to worry about her missing her next show. Her clothes trapped a lush, middle-aged figure into a silhouette that was a used-up thirty. Her eyes were large ovals that in fact, seemed constantly to be in motion. When she spoke her voice startled me. I expected it to be sharp, hard. It was a throbbing contralto, rich and caressing, every note of it an embrace. She directed her attention, I soon noticed, exclusively to Jeff.

"Well, May," she said, "and who is this?"

"They're from the bank," May said. "They came to tell you about a savings account you forgot you had."

She went into a gale of laughter; Thelma Kennedy didn't appreciate whatever it was that May was appreciating so raucously.

"You're a scream," she said. "Put something on the Vic."

May wound up the portable phonograph and set the needle on the record that was already in place. Helen Morgan began to sing "My Man." On her way to the sofa May took a piece of candy from a large heart-shaped box. She bit into it, made a face, and passed it on to Thelma who popped it into her mouth without glancing at it.

"Sit down," Thelma said to us.

We sat down.

Jeff said, "My name is Jeff Troy."

"What's in a name?" May asked him, as if she expected an answer. But Jeff refused to go into that. He said, "And this is my wife, Haila."

"I was afraid of that," Thelma said.

"It's no skin off your nose," May said to Thelma. "I saw him first."

"We," Jeff said hastily, "are friends of Frank Lorimer."

"Any friend of yours is a friend of mine," Thelma said. "Who did you say?"

"Frank Lorimer. He was your father's coachman. Or was Hiram Kennedy your father-in-law?"

Thelma smiled. "I like your attitude, but Hiram wasn't my father or my father-in-law. He was my brother-in-law. I married his kid brother, and I mean *kid* brother. Louis was thirty years younger than Hiram."

"Your husband . . ." Jeff said, and hesitated.

"He's dead," Thelma said. "He died."

"Oh, I . . ."

"It's all right. Those things happen. One day a man is alive, the next day he isn't. Just like that and you wake up and find yourself a widow."

May giggled. "Thelma, you ought to wake up and find yourself a widower."

"Who wants a widower?"

"I might," May said. "How many have you got?"

"How many do you need?"

"It depends on how big they are," May said.

Laughter had been foaming up inside the two ladies and now it gushed from them in torrents. They shrieked like a pair of schoolgirls. Their routine had them in the aisles; they knocked themselves out. Jeff waited until each was gasping for breath simultaneously, then he made his pitch.

"Mrs. Kennedy," he said, "do you remember Frank Lorimer?"

May snapped up Jeff's cue. "Was he tall, dark and handsome? If the answer is no, then Thelma don't remember him."

Thelma said, "Do me a favor, kiddo, drop dead."

"Drop dead? Okie dokie. But it'll be the last thing I ever do for you."

"I get it," Thelma said.

"Now you got it, what are you going to do with it?"

"It might look nice over the mantel," Thelma said.

The Marx Sisters sounded as though they could keep this sort of thing going forever, or at least until eleven o'clock the next morning.

Jeff waded into the act and broke it up; he didn't bother being charming about it. There wasn't time for that.

"Girls," he said, "I'm all in favor of organized play when it's too nasty to go out of doors, but this is serious. Mrs. Kennedy, you must remember Frank Lorimer."

"Sure I do. But by the time I married Louis, Frank was Hiram's chauffeur, not his coachman. That coachman stuff threw me off. What's this all about?"

"Frank hired me to help a woman who needs some help. Frank thought this woman was going to be killed. Murdered."

"Murdered? What woman? Who?"

"Frank never told me. He . . ."

Thelma Kennedy laughed. "Baby, you've been taken!"

"I don't think so."

"Yes, you have. Frankie has been hitting the bottle for so long that pink elephants bore him. Now it's got to be a woman's going to be murdered."

"No," Jeff said. "Frank knew what he was talking about. He was killed because he knew what he did. He was murdered, pushed in front of a subway."

May gasped. Thelma stood up suddenly. She walked to the phonograph and stopped Helen Morgan in the middle of her lament about her man. She went back to the sofa.

She said, "It could have been an accident."

"No."

"Yes. Frank drank like a fish. Hiram had to fire him because of that. Then later Frankie got in trouble while he was drunk, out near Chicago someplace. He hit somebody with a car and he went to jail for it. The last I heard tell of him, he was out on parole. That was quite a while ago."

"Out on parole," Jeff said. "Then that's it. Frank must have jumped his parole. That's why he came to me, instead of to the police."

"Frank certainly fooled you," Thelma said. "It looks like he found the two people in the world that would take him seriously."

Jeff told her why we were taking Frank Lorimer seriously; he told her what had happened to us since we had taken over from Frank. She listened with a deepening frown.

"Well, even if it's true," she said, "what can anybody do about it? What are you doing?"

"We're trying to find the woman," Jeff said. "In time."

"The time," I said, "is eleven tomorrow morning."

"Good God," Thelma said. "Do you have any idea who the woman is?"

"She might be someone Frank hardly knew. But more likely it's someone who meant a great deal to him. A member of his family or . . . or someone he once worked for. . . ."

"Me, for instance?" Thelma's eyes widened. "You mean me?"

"All I know is that it's a woman."

Thelma smiled wryly, shook her head. "Not me. I can't make it at eleven tomorrow. I got an appointment at the hairdresser. I'll be tied up all morning. If it's me they want, tell them I'm sorry. Now maybe the day after tomorrow. . . ."

"Wouldn't it be funny," Jeff said, "wouldn't it be hilarious if it were you?"

"No, you'll have to keep on looking. If I was dying, Frank Lorimer couldn't walk across a room to save me. He couldn't stand the sight of me. I wasn't good enough to marry Hiram's kid brother."

"He'd forget about that, if your life was in danger."

"No. I knew Frank and he hated me. I mean hate."

"So you're sure," Jeff said, "that you can't be the woman?"

"Believe me," Thelma said, "it don't make any difference to anyone that I'm alive and it wouldn't make any difference to anyone if I was dead. That's me, in a nutshell."

"Move over," May said, "and I'll get in the nutshell with you."

"You get a nutshell of your own."

"Girls," Jeff said wearily. "Mrs. Kennedy, do you know if Frank had any family?"

"Not that I know of. But then I wouldn't know."

"What did he do before he started working for Hiram Kennedy?"

"He was a coachman. For old Hollingsworth Cortland and his wife. They were good friends of Hiram's."

"Are they in New York?" Jeff asked.

Thelma smiled. "I've sort of lost touch with the Hollingsworth Cortlands of late. I can't think why."

Jeff said, "Are you the only one of the Kennedy family left?"

May suddenly giggled. "I'll tell him, Thelma, so you don't have to mention her name. You'd strangle on it." May turned to Jeff. "There's Sally Kennedy."

"Yes," Thelma said. "Hiram's darling daughter."

"Where is she?" Jeff asked.

"She's in New York," May said. "She's staying at the Sultan."

"She is?" Thelma was surprised. "How do you know that?"

"I read it in a column."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"As if you care, Thelma!"

"Sure I care." Thelma laughed, then said, "After all, I'm her aunt."

"You somebody's aunt!" May thought that was stupendous. "Aunt Thelma!"

Jeff said, "You and Sally aren't friends, Mrs. Kennedy?"

"Hardly. We haven't seen each other for years. Or spoken to each other."

"Did Frank Lorimer like her?"

Thelma sneered. "She's a Kennedy, isn't she?"

"I think," Jeff said, "that we should see Sally."

"Give her my love," Thelma said.

"Good-bye, girls," Jeff said.

Neither of the girls volunteered to show us to the door. We made our way through the hall and Jeff eased open one side of the massive mahogany portal a few inches. He looked out through the narrow slit. Then, carefully, he closed the door again.

"I think," he said, "It would be smart to play it safe and go out through the back."

"Jeff, what did you see out there?"

"A delivery truck. It's parked across the street. It's one of those little black jobs without any name painted on it. The kind mugs rent to peddle stolen suits, for instance. I mean anyone can rent one, anyone at all."

"Did you see the driver?"

"Yes. He's no one I've ever seen before."

"But that," I said, "doesn't mean anything. There might be someone hidden in the back, mightn't there?"

"There might be," Jeff said.

"With a gun. A rifle maybe, this time."

"It's possible."

"Jeff," I said, "I agree with you. Considering everything, I wholeheartedly agree with you. I think we would be smart to play it safe and go quietly out through the back."

9

IT WAS TWENTY MINUTES LATER that Jeff knocked on the door of the Hotel Sultan numbered 807 and, after a moment, a far-away voice called, "Come in."

There was no one in the big living room of the suite, there was hardly space for anyone. Sally Kennedy's possessions were piled high and wide. Dress boxes, shoe boxes, round, shiny hat boxes, all proudly displaying Fifth Avenue labels, swamped the room. On the coffee table a pile of new books and all the latest magazines threatened to squeeze the life out of a bright red hat festooned with tiny, jet-black feathers. A fur coat was slung carelessly over one chair, a fur jacket over another. Three suitcases, so battered and worn that they looked out of place amid all this luxury, sprawled open on the floor.

The bedroom door swung open.

"Miss Kennedy?" Jeff said.

The girl in the pale blue negligee nodded.

"I'm sorry to bust in on you like this," Jeff said. "I apologize."

"It's quite all right, I suppose," Sally Kennedy said.

She wasn't beautiful. She had red-gold hair that swept into a cluster of little curls at the top of her head. She had the face, the figure of an angel from that part of heaven over Hollywood, California. She had all that, and she wasn't beautiful. Her face was cold, disdainful and as uninteresting as pure white. Now it was touched with perplexity and the expression seemed to be trespassing.

"I was expecting a bell boy," she said. She spoke hesitantly, as though she hated to use her voice. "What do you . . ."

Jeff went into his routine. Sally was quite nice about it. Her attention never wavered. When Jeff told her that Frank Lorimer was dead, she made the right sounds of sympathy. When he told her that Frank had died to save the life of a woman we were trying to find, she didn't say that Jeff was mad. She was quite nice. She was interested and willing to help . . . if it didn't take up too much of her time. She let us know how valuable her time was by frequently consulting it on her watch.

She said, "I was only a child, you know, when Frank worked for my father. I wasn't very well informed about the women in his life."

"He never talked to you about his family?"

"Not at all that I remember."

"Was Frank ever married?"

"I couldn't say, really."

"We know," Jeff said, "that he also worked for the Cortlands."

"Oh, yes, the Cortlands."

"Do you know of anyone else he ever worked for?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't."

"Miss Kennedy, I don't want to alarm you, but . . ."

She raised a hand to halt Jeff; she smiled at him with patient understanding. "No," she said, "I know what you're thinking. But you're wrong. It can't be I who is to be killed. It's quite impossible that this plot should be against me."

"But you don't blame us for checking every possibility?"

"I think it's splendid of you to be so thorough. But it really can't be I. You see, I've just returned to this country. Only three days ago."

"Why does that make you immune?"

"May I explain?"

"Natch," Jeff said.

He didn't like Sally Kennedy. That made three people who didn't: her Aunt Thelma, Jeff and I.

She was going on in her cool, detached voice. "I've been abroad for nine years. I was a child when I left America to go to school over there. A child has no enemies. I certainly made no enemies in my absence. So no one could possibly wish me dead."

"You've been away nine years?"

"Yes. When war broke out I was interned in Austria."

"You didn't hurry home after it ended."

"No, I didn't. I stayed on there. As a nurse."

"You did what?" Jeff said.

"I stayed on in the camp where I had been interned. The people were in such horrible straits. There was so very much to be done. I did what I could for them. It was only a little, but it was something."

"Yes," Jeff said inadequately.

"So you see it can't be I Frank meant. And you mustn't waste time here with me. You will keep trying to find this woman, won't you?"

"Yes," Jeff said. "We will."

"I'm sure you will."

The door was open; Sally Kennedy was holding it open. If she bade us good-bye, I didn't hear her. We were outside in the corridor and the door closed softly behind us. We didn't speak of Sally. We couldn't think of anything nice to say about her, and you can't say anything else about a girl who had done what she had done in Austria.

"Jeff," I said, "how are we doing?"

"Fine," he said, "I'm not discouraged."

"Oh, I thought you might be."

"No. Look at it this way. The woman we want is probably in New York." He rang the elevator bell. "There are around three million women in New York. Three million and one, since Aunt Ellie swelled the population. Well, we know it isn't Thelma Kennedy. Or Sally Kennedy."

"Or me."

"Or you. So if we can keep up this pace, by tomorrow morning at ten minutes to eleven, we will have eliminated at least a dozen women. Then we'll only have two million, nine hundred thousand and . . . hell, no, I'm not discouraged."

The elevator doors opened; we got aboard.

"Jeff," I said, "whoever this woman is, remember that she has a great deal to live for."

"Oh, she does?"

"Yes. She's going to marry a fine young doctor. Then she's going to have five talented sons who will grow up to be the pitching staff that the Giants need so badly. Meanwhile she has returned to the concert stage and her glorious voice has made thousands of people happier, better people. This has virtually eliminated pushing in the subways."

"I see," Jeff said. "I hadn't thought of it that way." The operator opened the elevator and we got out. "I've been afraid that our lady keeps that large, floppy hat of hers on in theatres, doesn't curb her dog, writes mystery stories and will eventually drive her husband to such despair that he will sue you and me for not minding our own damn business this winter."

"Not at all. This woman is worth being shot at for."

"I'm glad," Jeff said. "I feel a lot better."

He had found where the management of the Sultan had hidden the phone booths. He opened a directory and his finger stopped at Cortland, Hollingsworth, 11 Gracie Square, ATwater 9-4313. He went into

a booth. When he emerged, he said, "Mr. and Mrs. Cortland will be happy to see us immediately."

"Do they know why we're coming?"

"No." Jeff was puzzled. "When I told Mr. Cortland my name he was lousy with delight. He was thrilled. They'll have tea ready for us. I don't know how he could have got to know me, let alone love me."

"Could he be a business acquaintance?"

"I don't have any business acquaintances. Where do you pick up such talk, Haila? Business acquaintance, indeed."

We looked out through the glass double doors of the Sultan. There were no cars parked where they could make a quick getaway. There was nobody watching the hotel. Over the entrance, stretching to the curb, was a canopy. Blithely we stepped out under it; we could not be seen from any rooftop across the street. A cab hurriedly slammed into gear and came charging at us from the corner. The driver heartily invited us to be his paying guests."

"No, thanks," Jeff said, and the cab moved on. "I'll feel better with a driver who doesn't volunteer to give us a ride."

"I'll feel better, too."

"You probably think me over-suspicious."

"Not at all. I admire you for it. It shows a nice regard for your life and limb. And, incidentally, my life and limb."

We waited a few minutes, then claimed a cab that a family of five had discarded at the Sultan's door. Before you, but not Mrs. Hollingsworth Cortland, could brew a pot of tea, we had been safely driven from East Sixty-eighth Street to Gracie Square. Mrs. Cortland was pouring the fourth cup as her husband steered us into the living room. She beamed at us; she was as pleased as her husband that we were there.

This elderly twosome made fact of the old saw that long-married couples grow to look alike. Their smiles, gentle and friendly, were identical. Their eyes, behind identical spectacles, blinked and twinkled with the same great good humor. Their hair was the same white-gray. They were both small and quick with the same eager fussiness. They were aged enough to have earned the right to informal, comfortable clothes, but they were dressed up as if they were on their way to have their pictures taken for their grandchildren's Christmas present.

"Claire," Mr. Cortland said, "this is Mr. and Mrs. Coy."

"Oh," Jeff said. Now the reason for our welcome was apparent to us. "I'm afraid, Mr. Cortland, that you misunderstood me on the phone. Our name is Troy."

"Yes, I remember now. You did say Troy. Be seated, Mr. and Mrs. Troy, be seated."

Our hostess leaned across the table toward me. "Mrs. Troy, lemon or milk?"

"Milk, please."

"Oh, I'm so glad! So many people make the mistake of taking lemon in their tea. Mr. Troy, what will you have?"

"Milk," Jeff said promptly.

"Splendid!" Mrs. Cortland cried. "I'm sure you two are a most happy couple. Now we all have our tea, haven't we?"

"Yes," we all said.

"Nice of you to drop in," Mr. Cortland said.

"So nice," his wife agreed. "People don't drop in for tea the way they used to. I don't know what's getting into people. Busy, busy, busy."

"Why, when we were still in the house on Gramercy Square," Mr. Cortland said, "hardly a day passed that somebody didn't drop in for tea. And sometimes stay for dinner. I miss the old house."

"It was too large for us, Holly. It would have been silly to keep it."

"Father would turn over in his grave if he knew a son of his was living in an apartment. A four-room apartment."

"It was the sensible thing, Holly." She turned to us. "You see, when the children grew up and went their own ways it was impractical to keep the old house for just the two of us. And you know it was, Holly."

"I miss the old house."

"Your house," Jeff said, "was near the Kennedy's, wasn't it?"

"The Kennedy's!" Mrs. Cortland cried.

"Sally Kennedy!" her husband shouted, and they both shook with laughter until their tea cups rattled. "So it's Sally!"

Mrs. Cortland said, "I thought we had met you through the Albertsons."

"No," Jeff said, "in fact . . ."

"And I thought," Mr. Cortland said, "that we had met you at the Cunningham's."

"We've been dying to ask you!" Mrs. Cortland said.

Jeff said, "There seems to be some . . ."

"At any rate," our hostess went on, "it's so nice of you to drop in. So few people do anymore. This is a real treat, having someone for tea."

"You must come often. Mustn't they, Claire?"

"Yes, indeed! This is a coincidence! You know, Sally has promised to stop by later this afternoon. We haven't seen her since she got back. Did you meet Sally abroad?"

"Mrs. Cortland," Jeff said. He spoke momentarily in an attempt to get the floor and keep it. "We are by no means friends of Sally Kennedy's. We have seen her just once, a few minutes ago. We went to see her about the same thing that we have come to you about."

"Oh, dear!" Mrs. Cortland said.

"Yes," Jeff said, "it's unpleasant."

He told them just how unpleasant. They forgot about their tea. They edged forward on their seat, staring at Jeff in consternation and disbelief. Jeff made them believe. He told them that they could help us; they promised to do everything within their power.

"When Frank worked for you," Jeff said, "did he ever talk about himself?"

The old gentleman thought that over. He said, "You mean did he ever tell us about a woman who might be the one you are seeking? No, I can think of no one. He never spoke of his family. He never told me anything of his life previous to coming to us. He came to us through an agency."

"Yes," Mrs. Cortland said. "Frank was with us just a short while before he went to the Kennedys. We saw him occasionally of course while he was there, but in the past fifteen years we've never laid eyes on him."

"Mr. Troy." Mr. Cortland rose and went to his wife. He put a hand on her shoulder. "I appreciate your reluctance to needlessly alarm us."

"What are you getting at, Holly?"

"Just a moment, Claire." He returned his attention to Jeff. "I gather that you have already checked the possibility that this woman might be one of the Kennedy girls, Thelma or Sally. I think, in fact, I know that I can assure you that you can check both Mrs. Cortland and our daughter off your list. There is absolutely no one in the world who could gain in any way if . . . should something happen to Elizabeth or her mother."

"Of course not!" Mrs. Cortland said. "Why, Elizabeth isn't even in the East. She's in California."

"I see," Jeff said. "Then we've reached a dead end. Unless we find someone . . . unless you can tell us of someone who knew Frank, who might remember."

The Cortlands looked at each other and slowly shook their heads. Then Mr. Cortland turned sharply and leaned forward.

"There is someone," he said. "Mr. Troy, I may be able to steer you to someone who knew Frank rather intimately. He might possibly be able to help you."

"Who's that, Holly?"

"Dobbs. You remember Dobbs."

"Of course. Carl Dobbs!"

"Yes. He's the lawyer for the Hiram Kennedy estate. In the old days, when Hiram was living, it was his lot to . . . well, perhaps you know that Frank drank. Rather strenuously at times. And it was Dobbs' duty, as family lawyer, to rescue him from the hands of the police once a month or so. At last, of course, Hiram had to dismiss Frank. But I'm sure that Frank must have considered Carl Dobbs one of his best friends. Getting a person out of jail is an endearing thing to do, if you are the person."

"Where," Jeff said, "can I find Mr. Dobbs?"

"He's uptown now. In Rockefeller Center, I believe. Dobbs, Last and Knapp."

"Thank you, Mr. Cortland."

"God speed you, young man."

"And do come back to tea," Mr. Cortland pleaded, "when circumstances are happier."

We promised that we would.

10

WE HURRIED THROUGH THE CITY OF the future that was Rockefeller Center. We found the gray, sleek building that we wanted and were shot up a vertical tube inside it at

the speed of the future. We walked down a sterile corridor that was a tube laid horizontal. We found the fireproof, feather-touch doors marked Dobbs, Last and Knapp. We went through those doors of the future and stepped smack into the past. It was a shock. It was like finding King Arthur in a zoot suit.

The furnishings, complete from chandeliers to wall hangings to the multi-design carpets, were at the latest early Victorian. The offices of Dobbs, Last and Knapp, as the grand-daddy of the partnership must have first furnished them, had been recreated here. Every stick and stitch had apparently been carefully carted uptown from lower, little old New York. The solid respectability of the rooms made the rest of Rockefeller Center seem as giddy as Coney Island.

When, after a twenty minute wait, we were ushered into the presence of Mr. Dobbs, we found him a reflection of his environment. He was a man in his sixties, tall and spare. His cool gray eyes sat far behind a long, proud nose. His mouth was thin and the thin smile of welcome that flickered across it would have frozen the most callous invader in his tracks. Mr. Dobbs was forbidding.

He listened to Jeff's story without once looking at him. He sat behind his barricade of a desk and set a target for his eyes three feet over Jeff's head. He didn't speak when Jeff had finished. He cleared his throat and made a note on a pad before him. It might have been a note on the business at hand. It might have concerned a tariff law of the late eighties.

Finally he said, "Frank Lorimer."

Jeff said, "Yes."

Mr. Dobbs looked at Jeff as if he had made an entirely irrelevant and unnecessary remark. "Frank Lorimer," the lawyer said, "has been attempting to reach me. He called me at my home yesterday, several times, but I was not in. I left word that if he called again, I would see him here at the office late this afternoon. I took for granted, of course, that what he wanted was money."

"When he couldn't get in touch with you," Jeff said, "he got panicky. He called me."

"It seems so. Mr. Troy, have you gone to the police with this story?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what was their attitude?"

"They were inclined to think," Jeff said, "that it was all an alcoholic dream of Frank's."

"Hmmm. Frankly, Mr. Troy, I am similarly inclined."

"No," Jeff said. "No, that's . . ."

"Young man." The lawyer leaned forward. He spoke severely. "I knew Frank Lorimer. He was indeed an alcoholic. And, when in his cups, he was prone to imagine the most incredible, outlandish and macabre fantasies. It was, unfortunately, my duty as his employer's attorney to listen to quite a few of them. Well, I see that Frank has not improved with the years."

"Mr. Dobbs . . ."

"And if I had forecast an end for Frank Lorimer, it might well have been just such an accident as did occur, an accident due to drunkenness. Now you say that the police agree with me. You, Mr. and Mrs. Troy, seem to be alone in your theory."

"Mr. Dobbs, since we've become involved in this thing we've been locked in a cellar, followed by thugs and shot at. Those, sir, are not alcoholic dreams."

The lawyer looked at Jeff, inspected him as if for future reference. It seemed as though Jeff's logic had momentarily confused him. Then he smiled. He was content again. Once more he had put everything in the right pigeonholes. He didn't let us in on his conclusion. Instead he chose to humor us.

"Very well," he said, "you have come to me for help. In what way can I help you?"

"We're trying," Jeff said, "to find the woman."

"Ah, yes. Naturally. And you think that at one time or another Frank might have told me of some woman who might now be the one." Mr. Dobbs closed his eyes and moved the tips of his long fingers across his forehead. "I'm certain that Frank had never married. Fortunately. Nor had he any family that he was in touch with."

"Do you know of anyone that he worked for besides the Cortlands and the Kennedys?"

"No. No, I don't."

"This woman could be in the family of one of his employers. Mr. Dobbs, Hiram Kennedy was a rich man, wasn't he? I gather that he didn't leave anything to Thelma. Who got it all?"

"It's rather complicated, Mr. Troy, and entails a great deal of personal family history that I'm not sure would interest you."

"I'd like to hear about it," Jeff said. "Family histories are what I'm after. If you don't mind."

"Well," the lawyer said. His eyes went back to the target over Jeff's head. "Hiram Kennedy had a brother, Louis, who was almost thirty years younger than he. He had high hopes for Louis, he was like a father to him. But when Louis married that . . . that Thelma person, Hiram was through with him. He cut him off without a cent. He left everything to his daughter, to little Sally. Everything, that is, except the house. Louis got that. Of course, Hiram put Louis next in line, but he knew that little Sally would outlive Louis, which she has done. Louis died rather strangely in a boating accident on the Sound some years ago. His body was never found."

"Then Sally got all of her father's millions?"

"Not yet, not quite. Sally gets the bulk of the estate on her birthday. Then everything will be hers, entirely hers, to do with as she wishes. Hiram made certain that Sally would be mature and stable enough to handle such a large amount of money. Then there will be no chance for that wife of Louis' ever to get her greedy hands on the money."

"Mr. Dobbs, when is Sally's birthday?"

"In a few days," the lawyer said. "The day after tomorrow, in fact."

Jeff stood up. "And if anything should happen to Sally before her birthday? The money will go to Louis' heir, to Thelma? Is that right?"

"Why, yes. Yes, of course. But nothing can happen . . . look here, you're not imagining that Sally Kennedy is the woman Frank Lorimer meant?"

"Thelma Kennedy would gain by her death?"

"This is ludicrous."

"At least," Jeff said, "Sally should be warned, she should . . ."

"She should be nothing of the kind, young man!" The lawyer rose to his feet. "Miss Kennedy has had enough alarums and excursions in these past war years. I won't have her upset by this . . . this fantastic hallucination. She needs rest and calm and she's going to get it!"

"But we can't take a chance, sir, if—"

"Troy! Frank Lorimer evidently did get himself, and you with him, mixed up in some mischief. From your tale of what has happened to you and your wife, it is obvious to me that these are the sordid machinations of some underworld, gangster mob . . . precisely the sort of thing one would expect Frank Lorimer to become involved in. Sally Kennedy is my client; indeed, I might almost say she is my ward. I am responsible for her welfare. And I will not, I repeat, have you annoying her with this postposterous and false alarm!"

Mr. Dobbs sat down, marking the end of the time he had to give us. We could consider ourselves advised, chided and dismissed. We walked out of his office and to an elevator. Then we were standing in front of Rockefeller Plaza, looking at each other helplessly.

"He may be right," Jeff said. "If this is a false alarm, we shouldn't bother Sally Kennedy with it."

"But if it isn't false, if she's the woman . . ."

"Then it will be our fault for listening to Dobbs."

"We've got to talk to her again, Jeff. We can do it without scaring her. Mrs. Cortland said she was coming to tea today. Couldn't we . . ."

"Yes. You call them, Haila. Ask them if we can come back for some more tea."

A maid answered the Cortland's phone and I had to wait a few moments before Mrs. Cortland's voice floated breezily into my ear. She was glad that I had called again so soon. How was my nice husband?

"Mrs. Cortland," I said, "Sally Kennedy is coming to your place this afternoon, isn't she?"

"My dear, Sally just phoned me. No, she isn't coming. She begged off because she doesn't feel up to it."

"Oh, is she ill?"

"Not ill, really, just still shaken up from the other day. Nerves, I suppose. She wasn't touched at all, you know. Actually, it was very, very providential. . . ."

"Mrs. Cortland," I said, "what happened to Sally?"

"Why, that accident the other day. She was walking down Madison Avenue when the truck came up over the sidewalk. It was out of control, you know, and just barely missed her."

Afterwards, I couldn't remember whether or not I had hung up the phone, I raced out of the booth and shouted at Jeff. Then we were in a cab, charging up Fifth Avenue, bulling our way through the traffic. In three minutes, two minutes now, we would be at the Sultan Hotel. It might take another two minutes to reach room 807.

I said, "Thelma Kennedy gets that money if Sally dies before her birthday. It's Thelma who must be engineering this thing, isn't it? Jeff, we've got to do something."

"As soon as we take care of Sally, I'll call Hankins," Jeff said. "Just in case it is Thelma. But somebody might be doing it for her."

"We know somebody is. She's hired Joyce and . . ."

"No," Jeff said. "I mean somebody else might be the brains."

"But who? Who else would gain?"

"Her husband," Jeff said. "Louis Kennedy."

"But, Jeff, he's dead. He died years ago."

"Yes. In a boating accident. And his body was never found."

"You mean he's still alive?"

"I mean he might be. It's possible."

"But why would he have staged his own death? What would he gain by that?"

"From what I've heard," Jeff said, "if Sally were suddenly to die, everybody in the world would suspect Louis. But a dead man is never suspected of murder, not in this day and age. He'd be free to go around losing control of trucks and pushing people in front of subways. Probably the murder is to seem accidental and the money won't be tied up. Thelma could get it right away. But even if the accident was discovered to be murder . . . well, Louis died a long time ago. He's in the clear. And I bet that Thelma would have an unquestionable, absolute alibi. It's all a guess, of course, but . . ."

"But it sounds reasonable. Horribly reasonable."

"His body was never found. It's amazing how few bodies are never found. People are always finding bodies."

The cab plunged through a red light and we were on Sixty-eighth Street. The Sultan stood a hundred yards away. Jeff found some money, held it ready for the driver. The door we would use was on my side; I had my fingers on the handle.

In front of the Sultan another cab blocked our way to the curb. The hotel's doorman was standing at attention beside it. Then we saw a girl, hatless, her red-gold hair a flame in the shadow of the canopy, run across the sidewalk and dart into the taxi. She was carrying a black overnight bag. The doorman slammed shut the rear door and the car started east.

Jeff's voice heaved with relief as he spoke to our driver. "That's the girl we want. In that cab. Will you catch her for us?"

Sally's taxi turned uptown on Park Avenue. We were halted by a changing light and the traffic it uncorked. It was at Ninety-third that we spotted her again. Her cab was three blocks ahead of us and going fast. The New York Central tracks snaked out from under the ground and Park Avenue did a quick-change from full dress to working clothes. We raced on by garages, used furniture stores, antique shops,

stores with Spanish lettering on their windows. The Municipal Market hove in and out of sight. We had gained only half a block on Sally.

"Jeff, where could she be going in such a hurry? And why?"

"I can't imagine why. But I'm afraid she's headed for the 125th Street station."

He was right. Sally was out of her cab almost before it stopped. She ran through the side entrance of the station. Jeff slapped some money into our driver's hand and was across the sidewalk in two steps. When I caught up to him he was talking to the gateman at the foot of the stairs that led to the overhead tracks. The man said, "Yeah," and jerked his thumb aloft. We chased up the steps. There was only one train in the station, and it was beginning to move. We took one frantic look for Sally and then Jeff was pushing me up the steps of the quickening train.

"Jeff," I gasped, "what . . . where . . ."

"Damn her," he said. "The next life I try to save is going to belong to somebody in a slow wheelchair."

"She doesn't know we're after her, that we're trying to help her."

"You're right," Jeff said, "but I'm tired. Well, this is a nice change from a taxi cab. Let's find Sally."

"She mightn't be on this train. We're just taking it for granted that she is. Or did you see her get on?"

"No, I didn't. But she wouldn't run for a train that wasn't in the station, would she?"

"That sounds logical."

"Thank you. Now let's stay logical. If we start out to find her by working our way to the back end of the train, where will Sally be?"

"In the front."

"Naturally," Jeff said. "So we'll go toward the front first."

The four coaches we went through were filled, but Sally Kennedy was not in any of them. The dining car, too, was crowded. The steward shook his head and started toward us as we pushed through the door. Over his rapidly approaching shoulder I scanned the people at the tables. I almost missed her.

She was seated in the furthest corner at a table for four, wedged in between the window and a stout woman in a bright green coat. She held the menu spread before her and it shielded her face. But above it I could see the sweep of bright hair topped with the clustered curls.

I nudged Jeff, but needlessly. He, too, had discovered her. As we brushed by the steward, he mumbled something about speaking to a friend. We went to Sally's table and stood beside it.

"Miss Kennedy," Jeff said.

The big white card went down with a jerk. For a moment she stared at us blankly, but only for a moment. Then her face played a dual role. Her lips broke into a pleased smile of greeting while her eyes narrowed into slits that signalled caution. She cast a side-wise glance toward her tablemates that warned us against them as she thrust her hand in front of the stout woman and grasped mine. It might have looked like a friendly gesture, but it wasn't. Her nails bit sharply into my palm, her thumb pressed pleadingly on my knuckles.

"The Troys!" she exclaimed. Her voice was steady, her smile bright, but under it her lips were quivering. "How wonderful! I'm so very glad to see you. It's . . . it's been so long!"

"Hasn't it?" Jeff said. "We have so much to talk about. Couldn't we . . ."

She burst in quickly, the hysteria seeped up through the social razzle dazzle in her voice. "Of course we must get together and have a talk! I have so much to tell you, so much has happened since last I saw you! Where are you sitting?"

"We'll be in the last car," Jeff said.

"I'll gulp down a sandwich and join you." She nodded her head toward the door in a silent, pleading gesture of dismissal. "I'll be with you in just a few minutes!"

Bending over the menu, she pulled the order blank toward her. She lifted her pencil and held it poised at the top line. I saw that her hand was trembling.

Something had happened to the Kennedy heiress since we had heard her coolly decry the possibility of anyone wanting to murder her. Something had happened that was making her run away, as though forty red devils were hot on her heels. Something that, even here in the safety of a crowded dining car, held her in the clawing grip of fear.

She had been afraid even to speak to us. As we turned away, I looked quickly at the three other occupants of her table. The woman beside her sipped her tea and buttered her toast, apparently un-

aware of the giddy reunion that we had just run through. Across from Sally an elderly man gazed morosely out the window at the darkening landscape and evinced no interest in anything else. The fourth person at the table, a dapper little man with a trim blond moustache, was intently inscribing his dinner choice on an order blank.

Each seemed completely absorbed in himself, completely disinterested in the others. Yet Sally Kennedy had warned us. She was in danger, and that danger was close by.

There were plenty of seats in the last car. It was the smoker and few of the passengers had yet worked up a yen for a cigarette. We found two empty double seats and swung one back to make a place for Sally when she joined us. We settled down and watched the conductor work his way toward us.

"Jeff," I said, "where will we buy tickets to?"

"I don't know."

"Tickets, please," the conductor said.

"We'll have to buy them from you," Jeff said.

"All right," he said jovially. He pulled a ticket pad from his pocket and stood waiting.

"Where are we going?" Jeff asked him.

The conductor blinked.

Jeff tried again. "Where are you going?"

The man in blue smiled. "I'm not going anywhere," he said. "I'm working today."

"I mean," Jeff said lamely, "the train."

Our neighbors were gawking at us with amused curiosity. Across the aisle two men and a woman in facing seats were joined by a third man with an unlit cigarette drooping from his mouth. The four of them leaned forward, anxious not to miss a word of our uncomfortable plight.

"This is the 4:45 out of New York for Albany," the conductor said. "Would you like to go to Albany?"

"No," Jeff said, "I don't think so."

The conductor sat on the arm of the seat in front of us and winked broadly at his audience. He was going to make the most of this; this was something he would enjoy telling the wife about. Then, looking at him again, I could see that he enjoyed the reputation of being a great kiddier.

"What's wrong with Albany?" the conductor asked. "Why don't you want to go to Albany?"

Jeff didn't have the heart to spoil the man's fun. He said, "The water there doesn't agree with me."

"I see. Well, now, Tarrytown's a nice little place. Would you be interested in Tarrytown?"

"No," Jeff said. "What else have you got?"

"I've got Ossining," the conductor said. "Ossining, Chappawan, Croton, Oscawana . . . I think you'd like Oscawana. There isn't any water there at all."

"Two for Oscawana."

"All right. I don't think you'll ever regret it." He disconnected two strips from his ticket pad, punched them and handed them to Jeff. "Before you pay for these, would you like to step outside and look at them in the daylight?"

Jeff didn't try to think up an answer to that one. He paid for the tickets and the conductor, chuckling heartily and happily to himself, went his way. We had made his day for him. Jeff looked gloomily past me out the window.

The train, cornered by the junction of the Harlem River with the Hudson, turned north, clicked by the shipyards at Yonkers and raced on toward Oscawana, wherever that was, and Albany. We lit cigarettes and did our bit toward making the air in the smoker unfit for human consumption.

Jeff said, 'We ought to have stayed right there in the dining car.'

"But Sally didn't want us to. There was somebody around. She didn't want them to know we were helping her. Thank God she's smart, Jeff. She realizes that we can do her more good if we keep covered, if the gang doesn't spot us."

"I'd like to know that she's all right."

"Darling," I said, "what could anybody do to her in the dining car?"

"Probably nothing," Jeff said, "but I want to make sure."

"I don't blame you," I said. "I want to know, too."

"I'll be right back."

The late-comer across the aisle was opening up a conversation with his three fellow-travelers by using the old weather technique. They agreed with him that it had certainly been some snow storm we had

had. From there he went on to radio comedians, home-made bread, horses, arthritis.

Tarrytown faded away behind us; we were bearing down on Ossining. Jeff slid into the seat beside me.

"All right," he said.

"Will it stay all right?"

"She's paying her check. She'll be with us in a minute. She sneaked me the high sign."

The conversationalist across the aisle was exhibiting a snapshot. He had first built up a terrific suspense by secretly examining the picture, holding it close to his ruddy face with its long sharp nose and continually blinking eyes. Now he handed it to the man beside him.

He said slyly, "Who do you think that is?"

The man glanced at it and promptly said, "You."

Blinky was crestfallen. "Oh. Oh, well, it is. But don't you see a resemblance to anyone else?"

"Can't say I do."

"You need glasses, brother," Blinky said.

He took the picture from the man's hands and turned away from him, suffering from acute frustration. Then he saw that I was watching him. He bounced to his feet and plunked himself in the empty seat facing us. He thrust the picture before our eyes.

It was a snap of our sharp-nosed friend and his automobile. One foot poised debonairly on the running board, he leaned back against the car with all the nonchalance of a pickpocket being photographed by the police. His mouth was open; he was obviously telling the person with the camera how to use it.

He slapped Jeff on the knee. "You see a resemblance to somebody there, don't you, young fellow?"

Jeff wasn't interested. He was tired playing straight man to the employees and customers of the New York Central. He had something else on his mind. He growled at Blinky.

"Now wait a minute," Blinky said. "If I'm buttin' in on something, just tell me."

"You're buttin' in on something."

"What am I buttin' in on? You two was just sittin' here, doin' nothin'! I'm tryin' to be friendly and you get nasty!"

"I'm sorry," Jeff said.

"Oh, it's easy enough to apologize! Anybody can apologize! If you don't like people," Blinky demanded, getting more obnoxious by the moment, "what do you ride on trains for? Why don't you hire yourself a private airplane?"

"Go away, will you?" Jeff said wearily.

"What did you call me?"

"Oh, God," Jeff said. "Look, pal, that picture of you does remind me of someone. I've got to admit it, it does."

"Yeah?" Blinky said, suddenly mollified. "Who does it remind you of?"

Jeff never got a chance to tell him. A flock of new passengers surged down the aisle and I realized that the train had stopped. Instinctively, I glanced out the window to see which station it was. I couldn't locate a sign; I could only see billboards advertising the current Broadway shows and, in front of them, a tall girl with red hair.

"Jeff!" I shouted. "Jeff, hurry!"

I plunged between him and the man with the snapshot. I started down the aisle to the platform. Through the pavilion of the station I saw a small blue sedan. Stepping into that sedan was Sally Kennedy.

Jeff charged after me. We met the jovial conductor on the car's steps. He held up a restraining hand and blocked our way.

"This isn't Oscawana!" he said. "It's Chappawan!"

We piled past him, down out of the train, across the station platform, out to the street.

The blue sedan had pulled out of sight.

11

CHAPPAWAN WAS AN ALMOST DESERTED village. Its main street told the story. Across from the railroad station stood a row of closed, sealed-for-the-winter shops. There was a lending library, a beauty parlor, a souvenir arcade, a bicycle rental place and the inevitable Sugar Bowl. Chappawan was a summer

vacation town. Now, at this moment in the dead white of winter, there was absolutely not a soul in sight.

Jeff and I helplessly watched the train pull away around the curve of a wooded mountain. We went into the tiny station and read the sign on the ticket window: "Back in an hour." Underneath it some skeptic had penciled: "Oh, yeah?" We walked back out to the street. Far down it a light spilled from a combination gas station and grocery store. We headed for that.

When we reached the road-like street that Sally Kennedy's blue sedan had taken, an ancient, open touring car pulled across our path. Its operator was a smiling, bulky man who sat in the driver's seat as though it were his favorite easy chair. He wore a great, gaudy mackinaw, a cap with a shiny visor. He held up a hand to us, then enjoyed lighting a pipe before he spoke.

Finally he said, "My wife seen you two needed a hand."

"What?" Jeff said.

"From the bedroom window." He jerked the visor of his cap in the direction of the hill behind him. "She seen Jim Merton drive off and leave you. Made me get out the old bus and see if I could give you a hand. Glad to do it for you. Cost you five dollars, not including tip. Where do you want to go?"

"Jim Merton's fare is an old friend of ours. We want to catch up to her."

"Get in."

Jeff was as pleased as he was surprised. "Do you know where they're going?"

"Jim went up the mountain. Only one place up that way to go this time of year. Chappawan Lodge. Get in. I don't get out and hold the door open for young folks. Just for folks older than me and Art Smiley. Art's always too drunk to open the door himself. Get in."

We got in.

We were out of the village before the car was out of second gear. We went through an old covered bridge and we emerged from it into wild, up and down country. A strong wind blew clouds of snow across the road. The cautions against falling rock were so numerous that there was no room for Burma Shave signs. We passed a slow-moving truck; two men with shovels were scattering ashes from its rear. The highway steepened even more; our driver wrestled the car into low gear and slowly, doggedly climbed the mountain.

We writhed cautiously through an S-curve and suddenly, high above us, loomed a large building.

"The Lodge," our skipper told us. "Chappawan Lodge."

I stared at it, half expecting it to disappear. It couldn't be real. If it were, it hadn't been built from an architect's blueprint; it had been copied from a highly touched-up picture postcard. With the sculptured blanket of snow on its many-gabled roof, the gaudily red-trimmed building looked like a giant birthday cake. The drifts about it were tumbled-down icing. At first glance it was all gaiety, all carnival; with a second glance it grew pathetic. It was like a bathing beauty smiling desperately atop an iceberg.

A narrow drive ran up to its door, ducked under a trellised porte-cochere and wound back out to the highway. Only the "In" part of the drive had been cleared of snow.

Our car had been better on the hills than Jim Merton's blue sedan. It was backing out toward us now, and Sally Kennedy was plodding up the steps of the Lodge. She pushed open the door and disappeared.

The blue sedan came abreast of us, the drivers exchanged "Howdies," and it was our turn to use the narrow lane. In a moment we were under the porte-cochere. Jeff quickly gave our man six dollars, thanked him, and we hurried into Chappawan Lodge.

The lobby was huge and dusky, its high ceiling beamed with rough logs, its walls hung with Navajo rugs, its big windows curtained in bright cretonne. At one end of the room were two arches, the signs above them announcing that the front one opened on the bar, the rear one on the dining room. At the other end a log fire glowed and crackled in a field stone fireplace. A staircase, banked with rhododendron, started at the back of the room, climbed three steps and divided itself to go separate ways from there on.

I caught a glimpse of a pair of brown tweed-trousered legs disappearing at the top of the left flight. Bumping against one leg was a small overnight bag. I turned back to Jeff.

"She's being taken to a room."

"Yes," Jeff said thoughtfully.

I didn't see what there was to be thoughtful about. I said, "Let's go, darling. We'll go up and talk to her now."

"Wait a minute, Haila."

Jeff was inspecting the lobby. There was no one in sight now; we

were alone in the great room. Small copper lamps did nothing more than accentuate the loneliness of the place. Vases of bayberry and holly, current magazines and newspapers showed that guests were wanted but, apparently, had not materialized. That was understandable. Chappawan Lodge was undoubtedly a garden spot, but not this week.

Jeff moved to the reception desk at the right of the staircase. He flipped around the large leather-bound book that was the register. The name of the most recently-arrived guest was Mary Thompson, of New York City.

"Oh," I said.

"Yes," Jeff said. "If she wants to be Mary Thompson here, we won't spoil it. We'd better take our time."

We wandered to the dining room entrance. A solitary waiter came out of the kitchen and began setting tables. It was nearly dinner time. Dinner time. The thought made my gastric juices run riot. I had had nothing to eat the live-long day. The waiter put a fat roll on a plate, a fatter one on another plate. I felt Jeff's hand close on my arm.

"Where are you going?" he inquired politely.

"Those rolls," I said.

"No." Jeff was stern. "Remember what happened to Jean Valjean."

"He didn't starve to death. Furthermore, he swiped a loaf of bread. I only want a roll."

Feet shuffled behind us. A voice, well oiled with obsequy, said, "Good evening, good evening."

The man in brown tweeds was gliding toward us, smiling pleasantly at us, the unmistakable smile of a hotel manager. He wasn't rubbing his hands together, he only seemed to be. Blond, slightly bald, handsome in an overgroomed way, he looked the perfect host. If Phi Beta Kappa could be made in Hotel Management, he made it hands down.

"Good evening," he said again. He undoubtedly had a permanent crease engraved deeply across his chubby little tummy from bowing at the waist. "May I help you?"

"Yes," Jeff said. "We're friends of Miss Thompson and we . . ."

"Miss Thompson? Oh, yes."

"She's expecting us. I wonder . . . what's her room number?"

"Twelve. On the next floor."

"Thank you," Jeff said. "We'll go up."

"Oh, no, I'm sorry, but no!" Mine host was horror-stricken at the very idea. "Miss Thompson was quite definite about not being disturbed. The trip here, you know. A nap before dinner." He smiled at us. "She came here for a rest and if I disturbed her against her wishes . . . well, I could hardly do that."

He smiled again, sweetly, but firmly, a smile which said that he obeyed his guests' wishes to the letter, even if it involved calling out the militia.

I said, "well, could we . . . might we have a room?"

"A room?" The manager wrinkled his brow. "I don't know. If you'll step this way, please, I'll see."

We followed him across the lobby. He slid behind the counter of the desk and made the motions of a hotel manager seeing if there was an unoccupied room in his inn. He studied the key rack, the register; he shuffled through some old papers. He straightened up the desk. I thought he was about to start washing down the walls, when at last he sadly shook his head.

"So sorry," he murmured. "We seem to be filled up."

"Filled up?" Jeff looked around the empty lobby. "Do you keep all your guests chained in their rooms? Or is there a bull fight going on upstairs?"

"You might well think that," he smiled. "But, you see, in the winter I keep only a skeleton staff. And that limits the number of my guests."

"Please," I said. "I need a room. I'm dirty, tired and hungry. We won't use much service."

"Well . . . well, I'll try. I'll find something for you."

He pushed the register toward Jeff and handed him a pen. Jeff wrote "Mr. and Mrs.," then hesitated and looked at me. The manager's eyebrows flew up. I saw what was coming; I wished fervently for our marriage license. Having decided at last to use our own name, Jeff duly recorded it. But it was too late; the damage had already been done.

The manager spoke suavely, but the insinuation was there. "I'll help you upstairs with your luggage."

"We," Jeff said, "have no luggage."

I tried to help. "We don't believe in luggage. We like to . . ."

Jeff nudged my shin with the toe of his shoe. I felt a run race up my nylon over my knee and hit my garter. "You pig!" I said to Jeff.

"See?" he said to the manager. "We're married."

"But no luggage. How odd."

"All right," Jeff said. "We aren't married. There's no use trying to fool a man of your perception. It's this way. I'm a famous surgeon." He held out a hand to show how steady it was. It was steady, but it was dirty. He put it behind his back. "I am married to a woman who doesn't trust me. She thinks I'm running around with Haila. This is Haila. Say hello to the man, Haila."

"Hello. I am a milliner's model. In the off season I model foundation garments and do a little stag party work. I am determined that my young brother shall have the education I was denied . . ."

"That will do, Haila."

"Yes, doctor."

"Where do you get that doctor stuff?" Jeff snarled at me. Then he snarled at the hotel manager. "Listen, buddy, if you don't give us a room, I'm going to tear you and this joint apart and possibly pollute your entire water supply."

"You're delightful!" the manager cried. "You're both really delightful!"

"Do you get a room," Jeff asked, "if you're delightful?"

"I wouldn't turn you away for anything in the world. Please follow me. I'll show you to your room."

Our room on the second floor was a box-like place, completely standard. There was a double bed, one high chest, one low chest one ash tray, one glass, one bottle opener. The one bridge lamp did little to cheer up the room. I moved to the window.

The Lodge was a U-shaped building. Our room, in the main part of the hotel, was in the base of the U. From the window I could see the two dark, apparently uninhabited wings stretch away to my right and left. It had started to snow. The large flakes dropped like white stones in the still air of the court, but beyond the enclosure a wild wind was blowing the snow almost horizontally. It was nature operating at two speeds. I was grateful for the roof that was over our heads.

A chambermaid, openly annoyed at her extra duty, arrived immediately to make up our bed. When Jeff offered to help her she thawed, but when she discovered the job would take twice as long with his assistance, she froze again. I took over. Jeff gave her fifty cents and handed me a quarter. The door closed behind her.

"Let's go," Jeff said.

Our room was number nineteen. We walked down the wide cor

ridor to the room numbered twelve. Jeff knocked and there was no answer. He looked at me.

I said, "She told the manager she was going to take a nap. Maybe she is."

"If you were Sally Kennedy, would you be calm enough to take a nap?"

"No. I got the impression from her on the train that she wouldn't ever sleep again. You're right."

Jeff put his hand on the knob and turned it. The door moved open a few inches. He called Sally Kennedy's name through the opening. There was no response. We stood looking at each other. Then Jeff shook his head impatiently.

"We're being foolish, Haila. Nothing could have happened."

"But we've got to find out."

"Yes."

Jeff took a quick breath and pushed wide the door. Then we were standing in Sally Kennedy's room. It was like ours, the same size, the same furnishings. On a bureau there were toilet articles. In a slightly ajar closet I saw the long red flash of a dress or negligee. Sally had unpacked. I looked at the bed. It was rumpled. She had at least made an attempt to rest. But, now, she was not in the room.

"Well," I said.

"She could have got back down to the lobby," Jeff said, "during those few minutes we were in our room."

"Yes, she could have, but . . ."

"She wanted a drink, Haila. She needed one. She went down to the bar."

"That sound all right. Let's go to the bar."

The fire had been fanned into a cheerful blaze, more lamps had been switched on; now the lobby was a picture of warmth and contentment. Crowding the hearth were two elderly ladies, one knitting, the other crocheting. On a davenport a young woman slowly turned the big cloth pages of a picture book for a yellow-haired, pigtailed child. There was another woman scribbling postcards at a writing table in a corner.

The crocheter smiled and nodded at us. We smiled and nodded back as we hurried to the bar. Sally wasn't having herself a drink. It took but a glance to cover the taproom, the three high-backed booths, the row of tiny tables before the long, built-in wall seat, the bar that

angled across a front corner of the room. Behind the bar a boy, about the same age as twenty year old Bourbon, was throwing ice into a cocktail shaker. He had the place to himself.

An archway broke the fourth wall of the taproom and joined it to the dining room. We moved toward the opening and looked through. Only five or six of the many tables in the spacious room were linen-covered and set. The waiter, who still had full possession of the room, was now filling water goblets.

"There might be a sun porch," I said, "or a library. Maybe Sally is . . ."

"Mary," Jeff said. "It's Mary Thompson now."

As we went back through the bar toward the lobby, the boy spoke to us. "Dinner will be soon."

"Thanks," Jeff said. "Do you know Miss Thompson to see her?"

"Miss Thompson? Yeah."

"Have you seen her? Do you know . . ."

"This drink is for her." The barboy poured a daiquiri into a glass, pushed the glass forward on the bar. "Miss Thompson was just here. She asked me to have this drink ready for her. She'll be right back."

"Jeff," I said, "we can wait for her here."

"You wait. I'll see if I can find her."

"Darling! Sit down."

"I'd rather not." Jeff was frowning. "You order me something."

I watched Jeff hurry out into the lobby, then I climbed onto a stool at the bar and order two old fashioned. The boy made them quickly, quickly excused himself. He was doing double duty tonight. When he wasn't needed at the bar, he had things to do in the kitchen. If I wanted him, I was to ring that there bell, please. He ducked under the bridge-door of the bar and ran to the kitchen, whipping off his clean white coat as he went.

The door had just stopped swinging behind him when two gentlemen sauntered into the taproom. One was a big, portly man with an amazing shock of pure white hair—a country squire. I looked to see if there was a riding crop in his hand; there wasn't, but there should have been. His companion was as tall as he, but trimmer, not so well fed. His hair was still dark, but he looked older than the other, perhaps in his early sixties. He was a bit of a dandy, very polished, very urbane. It was he who rang the bell. It was the squire who shouted, "Yo, boy!"

The kitchen door burst open, in flew the juvenile, frantically quick-changing into his bar costume. He was pleased to see these two. "Hello, Mr. Merrill. Hello, Mr. Trask."

"Evenin', James," the dark one said. "We'll have . . ."

"I know, Mr. Trask, I know! An Irish whiskey straight for you and a Scotch and soda for Mr. Merrill."

"Correct, Jimmy," Mr. Merrill said. "Just a splash of soda."

He and Mr. Trask went to the wall bench and surrounded one of the small tables. Jimmy ducked behind the bar and went to work. I sipped at my drink. I found myself staring at the cocktail beside me, still standing untouched at the bar, as if I were a bulldog set to watch it, as if I expected it to disappear. I was being hypnotized by a daiquiri. I wrenched my eyes from Sally Kennedy's drink and looked out into the lobby.

The two needleworkers were still hugging the fire, the mother continued to turn pages for her child, the postcard writer had not moved. And they were still the only occupants of the room. My eyes went back to the daiquiri. I wondered what would happen if it weren't claimed in thirty days. I wondered where Jeff was. I slowed down the rhythm of my sipping at my old fashioned. I had had nothing to eat for twenty some hours. I heard Mr. Merrill and Mr. Trask converse over their drinks, without meaning to listen. Their voices became background music to my vigil.

"I never liked her," Trask was saying. "No voice."

"But a figure," Merrill said.

"Yes, a figure. I'll grant you that. But no voice."

"A beautiful face!"

"A beautiful face, yes. But no voice."

"She had poise, rare poise."

"Poise enough. But no voice."

"You, Trask, seem to demand a voice in a woman."

"Not in a woman, my dear Merrill, just in a singer."

I had to get down off my stool to reach Jeff's old fashioned. Standing there, I finished it in one gulp. I put down the empty glass and regarded the daiquiri. But daiquiris and old fashioned didn't mix. At least, not in me. Besides, if Sally Kennedy came back and found her drink gone, she might be annoyed. I wanted her to come back, but I didn't want her to be annoyed. I returned to my stool.

High heels clacked on the hard floor outside the taproom. I swung

around. It wasn't Sally Kennedy. It was a small woman, a mouse of a woman. Her eyes were large dark pools in her pale face. Her nose was powdered, her cheeks looked as though they had been pinched to make them rosy. Her dress was a frilly evening gown, but as modest as a Girl Scout's uniform. She stopped a few feet from the two gentlemen, as if she were afraid to intrude but wanted so much to be welcomed by them.

They welcomed her. They rose and placed a chair for her. Trask gallantly marveled at how well she looked. She flushed from her pearl necklace to the artificial gardenia in her brown hair.

"I thought I would dress for dinner," she said.

"Quite right that you should," said Trask.

"I love to dress for dinner."

"Any woman who looks as well as you . . ."

Jeff came into the room. He was alone. He shook his head at me, shrugged his shoulders. He sat down on the stool beside mine and picked up my glass. He didn't seem to notice that it was mine, nor that it was empty.

"Darling," I said, "she ordered a cocktail. She'll come back here to drink it."

"But where is she now?"

"Any number of places. With the manager . . . in his office or . . ."

"Yes," Jeff said. "I'm being an alarmist again."

He looked back at the trio by the wall. Trask was getting to his feet and the little lady was imploring him not to bother. She sprang out of her chair and darted to the bar. Her fingers curled around the cocktail glass that stood there.

"Wait!" I said involuntarily. "That . . . that's Mary Thompson's drink!"

"Yes," the little lady said. She looked at me with puzzlement. "Yes, I'm Mary Thompson. That's my name."

She carried her glass away, to the table.

12

SHE PLACED THE DAIQUIRI ON THE table. She started to seat herself and then changed her mind. She turned and took a half-step back toward us. Her great dark eyes were wide, her mouth was open. Mary Thompson was completely baffled.

She said to me, "What did you mean?"

"Forgive me, please," I said. "I thought . . ."

"This is my drink. I ordered it."

"I'm sure you did, but . . ."

"I don't know you," she said, "and you don't know me. I don't see how you could . . . without my knowing you. But you said that this was my drink . . . and you didn't know that I was Mary Thompson. I . . . I don't understand."

"There are two Mary Thompsons," I said, "and . . ."

"Oh, there are lots of Mary Thompsons. It's a very common name. But I'm the only Mary Thompson here at Chappawan Lodge. I'm afraid that I don't understand at all."

She wanted very much to understand. It was very important to her. But I wasn't the girl to clear up the matter. There was a thing or two I didn't understand myself.

"Jeff," I said, "help me."

He took over. He walked toward the little lady. "Miss Thompson," he said, "are you from New York?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed, as if he were accusing her of not being from there. "I live in Washington Heights. On Riverside Drive."

"You arrived here this afternoon?"

"Yes! I often come up here to the Lodge. I like it up here. It's lovely in the winter."

"You're in room 12?"

"I always have room 12! It's my room!"

"See here, young man!" Trask said sternly.

"I'm sorry, sir," Jeff said. "I don't mean to upset Miss Thompson, but . . ." He hesitated for a second, then plunged on. "My wife and I were to meet a friend of ours up here. And we thought that, for some reason of her own, she had registered as Mary Thompson. Be-

cause that was the last name in the book and she had arrived just a moment before we did. But it seems she didn't register at all."

"Impossible!" Merrill cried. The country squire was outraged. "Everyone who comes to a hotel must register. Law of the land."

"Our friend," Jeff said, "didn't register."

"Then," Merrill said, "she didn't take a room."

"We saw the manager showing her to a room."

"Really, young man," Trask murmured. "Now you're accusing Mr. Kramer, our good host, of breaking a law of the land." His emphasis on "law of the land" twisted it into a jibe at Merrill. "I'm certain that Mr. Kramer will have an explanation of his guilt. If guilty he be."

The waiter walked through the taproom tinkling a small bell. It was unnecessary for him to go on to the lobby. Before he was out of the bar the two elderly ladies, the mother and child, the postcard writer were streaming past us to the dining room. In their wake came Mr. Kramer. He was boiling over with good will, the shepherd about to feed his flock.

"Dinner," he cooed. "Dinner is served."

Trask and Merrill hesitated only a second, then their appetites won out over their curiosity. They each offered an arm to little Miss Mary Thompson and escorted her into the dining room. Kramer beamed at us.

"I see," he said, "that you found your friend, Miss Thompson. Good!"

Jeff explained our mistake to him. He explained that it was a Miss Sally Kennedy we were looking for. He told Kramer that we must see her immediately. He was emphatic about it.

"Who is it?" Kramer asked. "The name again, please?"

Jeff repeated it, loudly, clearly.

Kramer shook his sleek head. "Are you under the impression that there is someone named Sally Kennedy stopping here?"

"Forget about the name," Jeff said. "Maybe she did give you a phoney, after all. We want to talk to the pretty red-haired girl who got here just a moment before we did."

"A pretty red-haired girl?"

"You showed her upstairs to her room."

"I did?"

"Yes, we saw you. Which room did you take her to?"

"Why, the room where I take all pretty red-haired girls! My room, of course!" He laughed; he was delighted with his little joke. "And I've locked the door. And swallowed the key!"

Jeff said a nasty word to Mr. Kramer; Mr. Kramer was shocked and hurt.

"Oh," he said, "I see."

"What do you see?"

"It's quite all right for you two children to have fun, but when I want to play . . ."

"Where is Sally Kennedy?"

Kramer stopped smiling. His voice was suddenly cold. "There is no Sally Kennedy staying here. I did not show her to a room. You could not have seen me showing her to a room."

"You were going upstairs with her when we came in."

"I was already upstairs when you came in. I saw you arrive from an upstairs window. Now, please be good enough to have some dinner. And, if you insist, we'll discuss this afterwards. Over some rather good brandy I happen to have." He was smiling again. "You two! How you do carry on! Come, I'll show you to your table."

"Not just yet," Jeff said.

"You would like a cocktail first?"

"Yes, that's it."

Kramer rang the bell on the bar. "If there's anything I can do for you . . . anything . . ." Bowing, he backed away from us, turned and walked briskly into the dining room.

The boy mixed us another pair of old fashioned. He brought them to us in a booth. Jeff suggested that we sit in a booth; he had made a point of it. The boy went back to the kitchen and we were alone in the taproom.

"Kramer's lying," I said. "He knows that that was Sally Kennedy who came here, that she is the red-head. I could tell he was lying."

"Yes."

"But why? Why is he lying?"

"I think that he's acting under orders. Orders from Sally."

"From Sally!"

"Yes. I think he's hiding her, that she's made him promise not to tell anyone she's here."

"Including us, Jeff?"

"She mightn't know we're here. And if she does know, maybe she

doesn't trust us. Remember that she didn't come to us on the train. She ducked off without seeing us."

"There was somebody in that diner," I said, "somebody watching her. . . ."

"That's true, but . . ." Jeff shrugged. "Haila, if you moved to the end of your seat, you could see into the dining room."

I pushed my drink to the outside edge of the table and I followed it. The big room beyond the archway came into view. I could see the expanse of bare table tops and stacked chairs on the right side, across an aisle one occupied table set for dinner, the part of another next to it. At that one I saw the lady crocheter in profile as she raised a glass of tomato juice to her lips. In the center of the room, directly in my line of vision, Kramer stood talking to a waiter.

"I can only see a part of the room, Jeff."

"Can you see Kramer?"

"Yes."

"Is he facing us?"

"Yes."

"As soon as he isn't, Haila, tell me."

"Oh. You're going to look around some more?"

"I'm going to find Sally and I don't want Kramer to know that I've gone. He might get over-zealous about his pledge of secrecy to her. If that is the explanation for his behavior."

"What other explanation could there be?"

"I don't know. Where is Kramer now?"

"Still facing this way. Jeff, what am I supposed to do while you're gone?"

"Stay here. Look as if I were still with you. That is, look enchanted."

"I'll be too worried about you to look enchanted."

"Nothing can happen to me. What could happen to me? Is it all right now?"

I scanned the dining room. The two men were still there, Kramer still talking to the waiter, the waiter nodding his head. Above the mumble and the clatter of the diners, I heard Trask's voice ring out. His words were indistinguishable, but the tone was summoning, a command. I saw Kramer turned toward the voice, his professional smile snapping to attention. The waiter hitched the tray under his arm and moved out of sight.

"Get ready, Jeff," I said.

The hotel manager glided around the far side of the old lady's table and was gone. I waited a moment, making sure that all was clear.

"Now, Jeff. And good luck. Give my love to Sally."

Jeff slid out of the booth and with three long, noiseless strides he was out of the taproom. He hurried across the lobby toward the stairway. I glanced back into the dining room.

The crocheter's head was bent over her plate as she buttered a sliver of roll. She hadn't seen Jeff leave. No one appeared in the archway. I looked back into the lobby. Jeff had disappeared up the stairs. No one was going up after him. His search for Sally Kennedy had started off, at least, unnoticed.

I settled back and fidgeted with my empty glass. From the dining room came the uninterrupted rattle of china, the bright clink of silver, the hum of conversation. A robust guffaw that could only have belonged to the robust Merrill rolled out once; it was joined by the more suave hilarity of Kramer. Perhaps they were amused by the giddy antics of Jeff and me. We had insisted that there was a pretty, red-haired girl on the premises. How amusing of us! The little child's voice lifted its soprano above the laughter, raised in a question. I tried to shut out these noises and to catch some sound from above. There was nothing that I could hear.

Kramer stood suddenly in the dining room arch, his eyes upon me. I leaned across the table. I was interested and amused by a story that Jeff was not telling me. I was pretending that he hadn't told it to me a dozen times before. I nodded and laughed a little. Jeff had never, simply never, enchanted me more.

The manager took a step forward.

"The dining room is only open for an hour, Mr. and Mrs. Troy," he said. "Perhaps you had better come in now."

"We'll be right there," I said.

He shoved his hands into his pockets and sauntered toward me. "In the wintertime, you know, we have only . . ."

Two more steps and he would be beyond the high back of the seat opposite me.

"Yes, I know! I do know, Mr. Kramer!" I clutched my glass, my fingers concealing its emptiness, and waved it at him with the wild desperation of an unrequited alcoholic. "I'm almost finished . . . just

another second, Mr. Kramer!" I looked at the vacant bench opposite me and smiled a question at it. "You don't mind waiting just another second, do you, darling?"

Kramer took one more step and halted. He nodded agreeably. "I'll have the waiter put the tomato juice at your places," he said. "But do hurry, Mrs. Troy, I'm sure your husband is starving. As a matter of fact, I think it would do you both a great deal of good to eat a little something."

He smiled sweetly at me. He went back into the other room, turned to the left and moved out of sight. I took the pebble of ice out of my glass and rubbed it across my forehead; much more of this ghastly make believe and I would need two strong men to chafe my wrists.

A minute crept by, two minutes. Kramer would be back. This time he would be more insistent. This time he would come directly to our table and escort us into the dining room. I leaned far out and looked across the lobby to the foot of the stairs. They were empty; Jeff's mission was still uncompleted.

The whooshing sound of the kitchen door swinging to and fro on its hinges sent me sliding back deep into the booth. Someone had entered the taproom, someone who would see immediately that I was alone. There was no inventing Jeff's presence now; now I would have to explain his absence. He had gone to our room for cigarettes, for my purse, my coat. That was it. I was chilly, I wanted my coat. I prayed that I wouldn't perspire visibly when I said it.

The door had settled in its frame and I waited for approaching footsteps to follow. There was no sound at all, no movement. I twisted around until I could see the door. I turned until I could see all of the room behind me. I was the only person in the place.

It was a moment before I realized the truth. If no one had entered the taproom, the door must have closed behind someone, closed as he went out. But Jeff and I had been alone, completely alone. No one could possibly have . . .

I got on my knees and looked over the tall back of my seat into the booth behind me. A wine list lay on the table, beside it a big glass ashtray. From out of the ashtray, from a dying cigarette, a thin spiral of smoke curled up toward the ceiling.

I sank back into my seat. Someone had been sitting close behind us. But that, I told myself, might not be important. He might not have heard us talking. Even if he had, it might have made no sense to

him. There was no reason to believe that he had been eavesdropping. He had finished his cigarette and gone quietly away. Quietly . . . too quietly.

He had slipped out of the room so silently that it must have been on tiptoe. The only sound he had made had been when it no longer mattered, when the swinging door had disturbed the air behind him. Now I was sure.

Jeff was not searching Chappawan Lodge with a free hand. Someone had gone to follow him, to find him, to prevent his finding Sally Kennedy.

Without even a glance toward the dining room, I ran out of the bar. I didn't care who saw me. I didn't care about anything except catching up to Jeff before the man in the booth caught up to him.

I raced across the lobby and up the stairs to the second floor. It was here, in the rooms off this landing, that the few guests were quartered. The two wings of this floor and the entire floor above it were unoccupied. It was in that part of the hotel that Sally Kennedy would be hiding. Jeff would have realized that. By now he would have searched the wings on this floor; he would be upstairs. I climbed the second flight.

The light that drifted up from the landing below was too meager to help me much visually. It did nothing at all for my morale. Directly before me I could make out a pair of tremendous sliding doors. Behind me, across the stairwell, were the guest rooms. Somewhere to my right and to my left were the corridors of the two wings. I had taken one step toward the first of the guest rooms when I heard a whispering scrape of footsteps on the stairs. I looked down. I could see a hand, a few inches of coat sleeve, moving up the banister. It wasn't Jeff's hand. I turned quickly away.

There was no time to reach the nearest guest room now. Stepping back, I found the slot of a handle in one of the sliding doors. Miraculously, the door slid open with only the sigh of a sound. I darted behind it, pushed the door back until it touched its mate.

The room was completely black. I crept into it with my hands outstretched, feeling for some protection, something to put between me and the man when he opened the sliding doors. I groped on and on. The place was gigantic, unending, a cavern, and it was bare, devoid of any furnishings at all. Outside, the footsteps drew closer, stopped.

I forced myself to push ahead into the thick, smothering darkness.

I jerked my hands back and forth in front of me and then the knuckles of my right hand cracked against something round, something solid. It was a column, a small one, and my arms encircled it easily. I stepped behind it and stretched out my hands again. They touched the softness of heavy velour. The great sliding door whined as it was thrust roughly open.

A figure, only a blur of a shadow, moved through the opening and stopped. I could see a movement as he raised his arm. A blade of white light sliced the length of the room. I saw now why the place had seemed a horizontal abyss to me; this was the ballroom of Chap-pawan Lodge.

The beam of the flashlight switched to the opposite wall and flicked along it, leaving me in utter darkness. I stepped from behind the column. I took another step and I was behind the heavy, comforting velour of the drapery, crowding back against an ice-cold glass door.

From my corner I could see obliquely through the curtain's opening. The circle of light was dancing perfunctorily now over the far end of the room. It moved across a bandstand, it rested a moment on a bass drum. On the skin of the drum was printed in rhinestone flecked letters: THE LODGERS. The light moved down off the bandstand. It began its sweep of my wall.

I could see a dim, milky haze as the probing finger of light settled on my drapery. I flattened myself against the window and held my breath. I turned my face to the side and pressed my cheek against the freezing pane.

It must have been because I was holding my breath so tightly that I didn't cry out. Through the window I could see the left wing of the Lodge. On the second floor two lighted windows threw soft yellow rectangles upon the snow-filled courtyard below. I caught the flash of red hair as Sally Kennedy approached one of the windows.

She pressed her hands against the glass and cupped them into a funnel as she stared out into the night. It seemed she must be looking straight up through the darkness of the court into my face.

The light fell away from my drapery. From the end of the room I heard a grunt and a muttering of disappointment. I heard footsteps moving away, the slide of the closing door, and I turned back to the courtyard.

She had moved out of the window, but the room was still lit. My

eyes raced back to where the wing joined the building proper and moved slowly back again. I counted the blackened windows. There were fourteen of them before those two bright ones broke the black wall. With two windows to a room, Sally would be in the eighth one.

I pushed aside the drapery and groped my way back to the doors. My hands touched their mahogany smoothness and I stopped and listened. There was no sound at all.

Quietly, with infinite care, I eased open one half of the door and stepped out into the hall. I crept down the stairs, out of the eerie gloom of the third floor into the normal light of the second floor landing. From the lobby below came the murmur of voices. Dinner was over and the diners had adjourned to the warmth of the fireplace.

I darted across the landing, rounded the corner into the left wing. The light from the landing faded behind me and I was in darkness again. The first four doors I was able to see; from then on I counted by touch. A floorboard squeaked beneath me once or twice, but there was no other sound.

My hand flattened against the eighth door. A thread of light escaped across the threshold and turned the blackness at my feet into a hedgerow of gray. I didn't knock or even whisper to Sally. Someone other than she might hear. I groped for the knob and found it. The door opened easily and so quietly that Sally Kennedy didn't know that I had come into her room.

She was sitting on the bed, leaning forward into the light of an oil lamp that stood on the table beside it. She wore a dressing gown, a pair of slippers. Her hair was caught up in a bright ribbon, her face glistened with cold cream. At the moment, she was doing her nails, and as she etched the crimson polish into the edges, she hummed a blithe, merry tune.

She might have been a girl without a care in the world.

13

I SHUT THE DOOR BEHIND ME.

"Sally," I said.

She leaped to her feet and wheeled to face me. Then she sank slowly down on the bed again. She carefully put the brush back into the nail polish bottle and tapped tight its cork end. She picked up a cigarette and lit it, taking care not to smudge her wet fingernails. She looked at me and she was smiling.

"You must never do that to me," she said, "never. I frighten very easily. Promise you'll never do that again."

"I promise," I said, "and I'm sorry."

She laughed. "I forgive you."

I went over to the bed and sat beside her. "It's nice seeing you so happy," I said. "And so healthy."

"Mrs. Troy, what's your first name?"

I told her.

"Haila," she said, "I've got a lot to explain to you, I know I have. The way I ran out on you on the train and all. I . . . I didn't know that you followed me from there."

I said, "We saw you at the station. We saw you get in a cab."

"But you couldn't have followed me up the mountain. I watched. There was no one."

"We met a man, a taxi driver, who knew that you must be coming here. Sally . . ."

"Yes, I know. What about me?" She took a drag of her cigarette, then snuffed it out quickly as though she didn't like it. "I found out that you were right, you and Jeff and old Frank Lorimer. Somebody is trying to kill me. I . . . I found it out as soon as you left me at my hotel. I packed and ran. I thought of this place, I'd heard about it from friends of mine. But I didn't get away cleanly. Someone caught up to me, a man. He followed me onto the train. He was in the dining car, watching me. . ."

"Yes, we guessed that."

"That's why I went into that strange rigamarole about joining you later. I didn't want to involve you. You . . . you'd done enough for

me already. But then I couldn't escape from the man in the train without running out on you, too. I waited until the very last minute and then I dashed." She smiled. "I owe the railroad a dollar-eighty."

"And after that, Sally?"

She shrugged. "After that, nothing. I got the manager to give me a room without registering, a room in this wing that's all shut off. I made him promise not to tell anyone that I was here. It cost me five hundred dollars, but . . ."

"Mr. Kramer," I said, "is earning his money. He acted as though we were crazy when we insisted you were here."

"But I wonder," Sally said thoughtfully, "why he didn't tell me you were here, asking for me."

"There was a mix-up. At first we thought you had registered under another name. He only found out it was you we wanted a little while ago. And since then he's been pretty busy in the dining room."

"I see. Well!" Sally placed a pillow against the headboard of the bed and leaned back against it. "Well, we can relax now. Everything's all right. I'm glad you found me, Haila. It would have grown lonely here."

I put my hand on her arm. "Sally, it's not all right. Not yet."

"What?" She sat straight up.

"When Jeff and I . . ."

"Where is Jeff?"

"Still looking for you. Sally, let me tell you. . . ."

She let me tell her how Jeff and I had been overheard by someone in the taproom, someone who had hidden in the booth behind ours. I told her how I had been followed to the third floor and into the ballroom, how I had eluded my pursuer and come to her. She was on her feet now; she wasn't relaxed and cozy, she was frightened.

She didn't speak. Snatching up a towel, she wiped the cold cream from her face in one sweep. She shook herself out of her dressing gown and ripped a suit from its hanger in the closet.

"Sally," I said, "wait. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure." She was getting into her suit, kicking off her slippers and stepping into her shoes. "I thought I was safe here. I thought I could hide out here until . . . until it was all right. But they know I'm here, somehow they know. They . . ." She repeated the word slowly; it seemed to hypnotize her the way an obscene reptile might. She said, "Who are they, Haila? Who could they possibly be?"

She didn't expect me to answer, she didn't wait for me to. She snapped back into action. Dragging her overnight case from beneath the bed, she stuffed her things into it. She flung her dressing gown into the bag, scooped her toilet articles from the bureau and scattered them across the gown. She tossed her slippers after them.

I said, "Sally, what are you going to do? Where are you going?"

"I don't know. Just keep running, I guess. That's all there is to do. I've got to keep out of their way until the day after tomorrow. Then . . . then it won't matter any more. Haila . . ." She stopped, and I saw the pleading question in her eyes. "Haila, could you . . ."

"Yes," I said. "Jeff and I will go with you."

She turned away. "Someday," she said quietly, "I'll be able to thank you both."

"It's all right," I said. "You finish packing, get ready. I'll find Jeff and we'll meet you in the lobby."

"The lobby!" The vehemence in her voice stopped me. "But they . . . they'll be there, Haila. They'll be watching. If they see us leave we won't get very far . . . not any of us. . . ."

"Yes," I said. "We'll have to find some other way."

"There's a way to get out of this wing, a door at the end of the corridor downstairs. Haila! Haila, listen carefully."

"Yes."

"Go through that door, you and Jeff. There's a row of garages out back, I saw them from the window. I'll meet you in the first one from the right that's open. One of them is bound to be unlocked."

"The first one from the right that's open."

"Yes. Hurry, Haila. And be sure that no one sees you. If they see you, if they follow you . . ."

I stepped out into the dark corridor. I leaned back against the door of Sally's room and listened. There was nothing, no sound at all. I could feel the vibration of the hotel as it stood against the storm, but here in this inside hall I could not even hear the wind. Quietly, I moved to the corner where the wing joined the main building. I stopped just around the corner and listened again. There was nothing.

He hadn't followed me. I had lost him. It didn't seem possible, however, that he would have given up his search. He must still be prowling through the darkness somewhere. Perhaps he had found Jeff. But Jeff wouldn't let himself be found. I had eluded the man; Jeff was more capable than I. Jeff was able to take care of himself. Jeff, for instance,

in a crisis wouldn't stand whistling in the dark to himself as I was doing. He wouldn't stand still; he would keep moving.

I hurried along the hallway until I came into the light of the landing above the lobby. I hesitated there. I had to find Jeff, but to search the three floors of this rambling, half blacked-out building seemed a hopeless job. Possibly . . . possibly I was expected to go wandering through it, looking for him. Possibly someone was counting on me to do exactly that. Instinctively I turned toward the lobby, started down the stairs. On the last step Jeff's voice drifted in to me.

He was standing at the bar in the taproom. Merrill and Trask were on one side of him, Kramer and Mary Thompson on the other. I took one step forward and then stopped, remembering Sally Kennedy's words, hearing the terror in her voice. Who are *they*, she had asked, who could *they* be? I moved quietly out of the range of vision of the people at the taproom bar.

I knew then that I couldn't walk up to Jeff, couldn't make an excuse to speak to him alone. One of the people standing with him, someone lurking just behind the kitchen door, someone hunched unseen in a booth might see through that excuse and know what to do about it.

I looked around the lobby. It was deserted except for the little girl who sat beside the fireplace chewing on one of her long braids. Her picture book was across her knees but she wasn't interested in it. She was staring at me with wide, curious eyes. She wasn't shy; she seemed to want to be friends. I saw then the means to accomplish my mission.

I smiled at the child. I felt like Fagin. Slipping into the chair of a writing table, I made a great show of doing something highly mysterious. Actually, on a picture postcard of Chappawan Lodge, I scribbled a note to Jeff, giving him the instructions that Sally had given me, asking him to pick up our coats on his way.

I had bet on the girl's curiosity; it was a good bet. In a minute she was at my side, trying to look across my arm.

"Shh!" I whispered.

"I didn't say anything."

"Would you like to do me a favor?"

"What'll you give me?"

I didn't have a thing to give the child. "A nickel," I said. "A nickel the next time I see you. No, a dime."

"You mightn't ever see me again."

"My dear!" I drooled, feeling more and more like Fagin. "Why won't I see you again?"

"Because I might turn into a pumpkin."

"Don't be silly. You've been reading too much." The child was looking significantly at the jade brooch I was wearing on my blouse. Jeff had given me it; it was one of the three things he had ever given me that I could wear in public. But I took it off and pinned it on her dress. It looked lousy on her. "Now will you do me a favor?"

"Yes."

"Will you give this postcard to the tall man with the dark hair? See him? He's standing over there with those people. The young one."

"I see him."

"Say to him, 'Mister, you dropped this.' Then give it to him."

"That's easy."

"Then come right back and sit where your mother told you to, you hear?"

"Shall I do it now?"

"Please. And thank you very much."

I watched the child trot across the lobby and into the taproom. The quartet by the bar didn't see her approach. Jeff and Trask were turned away from her and the two of them blocked Kramer's and Mary Thompson's view. She stopped outside the circle they made. She was looking up at Trask. He was tall, he had dark hair, to her he probably seemed no older than Jeff. I started forward and then stopped. There was nothing I could do now, nothing except pray that Trask was not one of *them*. The little girl stepped closer to the man, her hand reached out for the hem of his jacket.

Jeff turned and saw her. He smiled automatically and raised his hand toward Trask's arm. Then he stopped, his hand still in mid-air, his eyes fastened frowningly on the child's dress. He had seen my brooch in time. Jeff went down on one knee beside the child. He spoke to her. I saw her nod and hand him the postcard. I watched him glance casually at it, as though it were something he had seen before, and slip it in his pocket. I turned and went quickly out of the lobby.

The row of garages was a hundred yards beyond the rear of the hotel. I could see the low, long hulk of their shape through the falling snow. They were arranged in an arc and in the center of the court they made stood a high pole topped by a strong, blazing light. The fourth

garage from the right was open, wide open. Its front yawned black as a cavern in the white night.

I stepped into the shelter of the small building, fighting for breath. A hundred yards was a little over my favorite race. For a moment I could see nothing, then Sally was walking toward me out of the shadows of the car-empty garage. She wore a heavy coat, a scarf over her head. I wished that I had stopped for my coat, not left it for Jeff to pick up.

Sally's voice was a whisper. "Did you find Jeff?"

"Yes. He'll be here in a few minutes, everything's all right. Shouldn't we close the door? We can watch out for Jeff."

"I don't think we can close it." Sally pointed above her. "The chain seems to be broken."

The door was one of those that slides up into the roof. On its bottom edge was a handle, but the handle was a good three feet out of our reach. The wind rocked the big door back and forth in its tracks. Shivering, I moved with Sally to the rear of the garage. We found a box to sit on.

"Haila, you're freezing!" Sally slipped one arm out of a sleeve and shared her coat with me. "There. How's that?"

"Fine," I said. "Fine, thanks."

"And Jeff . . . he'll be coming soon? He won't be too long?"

"Not long, Sally. He'll be here. It's going to be all right."

"I don't know." Her voice was small. "I . . . I'm afraid. I don't understand all this."

"You don't know why they're trying to kill you?"

"It must be the money, of course. It has to be the money. I get all of father's estate on my birthday, the day after tomorrow. If I can live through the day after tomorrow . . ."

"Don't, Sally. Don't talk about it. Let's think about how we're going to get away from here."

"I can't," she said wearily. "I can't think anymore."

"We'll let Jeff do it for us. He's a thinking man."

"Yes. He found out that it was I. Haila, how did you find that out? That Frank Lorimer knew it was I?"

"It was a combination of things, Sally, a combination of facts. We got the first set from your lawyer."

"Carl Dobbs? Oh. He's such a darling, the old grizzly bear."

"He told us about your birthday, about your money and your

father's will. Then I phoned the Cortlands. It was Mrs. Cortland who told me about the accident, the truck that just missed you on Madison Avenue. We knew it wasn't an accident. Frank's death was made to look accidental. Yours was to look that way, too."

"Yes," Sally said quietly. "So I owe all this to a great many people. Frank and you and Carl Dobbs and the Cortlands."

"I doubt," I said, "if the Cortlands even know that they've helped you."

"I'll tell them sometime. And thank them. They're a dear old couple."

"You've known them a long time, haven't you?"

"Years and years." Sally laughed reminiscently. "Claire's such a darling. I used to call him Uncle Claire. Why, I practically grew up on his knee. He used to take me to the Zoo, all those things."

She prattled on, but I wasn't listening. Something was wrong, terribly, frighteningly wrong. She had known the Cortlands for years, she had said. She had called Mr. Cortland Uncle Claire, she had grown up on his knee. . . .

Frantically, I pushed my mind back to the tea party on Gracie Square. I saw the nice, elderly man, his white-haired gentle wife. I heard her speaking to him. Holly she had called him. I heard him answer; he had called her Claire. It was Mrs. Cortland whose name was Claire. Sally Kennedy had known them all her life, and yet . . .

I tried to keep my voice steady when I spoke. "Sally," I said, "what is Mr. Cortland's first name?"

"Why, Claire. Claire Cortland. Why?"

I stood up and moved away from the red-headed girl. I knew then that the girl was not Sally Kennedy.

"Haila," she said, "what's wrong?"

She was not Sally Kennedy. She was a member of the deadly conspiracy against Sally Kennedy. She had tricked Jeff and me from the start. This garage was a trap that I had sailed breathlessly into. In a moment Jeff would walk into it, too. There was only the girl here in the garage. There was no knowing who else was standing near, waiting, watching, ready. I had to warn Jeff; I had to keep him inside the hotel.

"Haila!" The girl's voice was sharp. "What is it?"

"Sally," I said, "you stay here. I've got . . . I've got to go back inside a moment."

I took a step toward the door.

"Haila, darling." Her voice was soft behind me. "Haila, turn around. There's something I want you to see."

I turned around. I saw at once what it was she wanted me to see.

It was a gun, a small, black revolver, and it was pointing directly at me.

14

"COME HERE," THE REDHEAD SAID.

She wagged the gun. Unpleasant lights reflected from its shiny muzzle. I had never before looked down into the business end of a lethal weapon. I didn't quite know the etiquette of the situation, didn't quite know what was expected of me. Then it came to me in a flash. You were supposed to stall. To stall for time.

"What?" I said, stalling.

"You heard me." She was being nasty now. "Come here."

"Just a second," I said. "I think there's something in my shoe. Probably a pebble from Fire Island. The last time I was there . . ."

"No, don't! You stand up. Straight." She had turned vicious; her voice was an angry snarl. "Back up against that post."

She pointed to the post. It was an upright two by four that stretched from the floor near the wall up into the rafters of the roof. It was not the sort of thing that I would enjoy backing up against. The gun in her hand weaved tiny circles, circles that funneled out and made the round stripes of a target on my stomach. I backed up against the post.

"Clasp your hands behind it," Red snapped.

I clasped them. A gun is even more frightening when it can't be seen. But out of the corner of my eye I saw Red snatch a roll of electrician's black tape from a nail on the wall above a workbench. I felt the tape tighten around my wrists, loop after loop, until it felt like a band of steel. Then she was binding my ankles. Suddenly a piece of coarse cloth slapped across my mouth and I was gagged, thoroughly, expertly. The girl was as fast and efficient as a registered nurse. She stepped in front of me to inspect her work. She liked it; she was proud of it.

"Get out of that if you can," she said.

I tried. I couldn't. I never would. I tried to speak and the sound was a gurgle in my throat. Red grinned at me. Then the grin slipped off her face, her eyes were alert. Abruptly she turned and hurried to the front of the garage. I twisted my head and I could see her standing in the open doorway. Jeff, my coat a bundle under his arm, was running toward her.

"Jeff!" she cried softly. Her voice throbbed with relief and gratitude. "Oh, Jeff, you're here!"

Jeff said, "Hello. Where's Haila?"

He couldn't have seen me in the black depths of the garage, but she planted herself directly between us. The gun was behind her back. She said, "She went back to look for you."

I saw Jeff glance toward the hotel. "She shouldn't have done that," he said. "She should have stayed here."

I struggled against my bindings and above me I heard a soft scraping sound. I looked up, pulling again at the post. I saw the garage door move a few inches forward in its track. I shook at the post again; again the door edged forward. I looked at Red and Jeff.

He was standing a few feet beyond her, still outside the garage. She was directly under the door. If I could shake it down now, quickly . . . I rocked the post back and forth. I could see it inch down to fill the top of the doorway. Most of its weight was still on the horizontal track. I worked harder.

Red was talking softly. "You'd better come in here, Jeff. Someone might see you, someone might know. . . ."

"I'll go back and find Haila," Jeff said. "You . . ."

"No," Red said. "Stay here."

I saw the gun move behind her back, I saw her arm stiffen. I threw all my weight back against the post. There was a tinny roar and the big door lurched forward. I heard Jeff yell a warning to Red as he lunged toward her. He tried to knock her out of the path of the downward hurtling door, but he was too late. The heavy frame hit her across the shoulders and threw her sprawling inside the garage. The gun flew from her hand and slid across the floor. Red lay quietly on the cement. A few feet from her lay Jeff, crumpled on his face. I groaned through my gags. I had got more than one bird with that stone.

I kept my eyes on Jeff, waiting, praying for him to move. He didn't.

He looked as though he had no intention of ever moving again. He looked completely inert and absolutely comfortable. But he had to come to first, he had to. If Red beat him back to consciousness, she would have us both. I looked at the gun on the floor. It was pointing at me.

Red groaned and moved, then lay still.

Jeff didn't even groan.

That round went to Red. Come on, Jeff, I rooted, come on, old boy, get up and get in there. If only I could reach him with my voice, if I could sing the Dartmouth fight song to him . . . that would bring him to his feet if he still had blood in his veins. I saw the fingers of Red's left hand open and close.

Jeff's left hand, and all the rest of him, was as limp as last week's lettuce.

Come on, you big bum, are you going to let a lousy girl show you up? Where's your pride? What will the boys on Greenwich Avenue say? Red straightened her legs and rolled over on her back. Her dress was high above her knees. Now Jeff would come to, if I knew Jeff.

He moaned softly.

That's right, you idiot, moan! Moan and pull Red out of her coma. Red's hands lifted to her face, her whole body struggled to rise. She lifted herself to one elbow, then fell back. She moaned again and her hand fluttered at her side.

My mind screamed at Jeff. "Get up, get up, get up."

Jeff sat up. He looked around him, saw his hat on the floor and put it on. He straightened his tie. He saw Red. He rose shakily, walked to her and knelt at her side. He began chafing her wrists.

I shook the post with all my strength; it made no sound. I heard Jeff talking, soothingly, urgently, to Red. "Sally, come out of it. Come out of it, honey." I strained against the binding tape at my wrists and ankles and I felt something give. I was able now to move one foot up and down. I pounded the floor with my heel. Jeff raised his head and listened.

"Rats," he muttered. "Rats."

He went back to work on Red again. I beat out a rumba rhythm with my heel. I prayed that Jeff wouldn't write that off as rats with talent. He lifted his head again. Desperately I pounded on the floor. Jeff rose, took two steps and saw me.

He tore the gag out of my mouth. He was behind me then, tearing

at the tape around my wrists. The blood rushed back into my hands and I nearly screamed. My feet were free and I stamped up and down.

"She isn't Sally Kennedy," I said.

"She isn't . . . what?"

"She made a slip about the Cortlands, she doesn't know them."

"What?"

"Never mind now. She tied me up, she's one of them. Jeff, we've got to get back to New York. Sally Kennedy's still there, still in danger. . . ."

Jeff was looking at the redhead. He leaned over and felt her pulse. "She'll come to pretty soon."

"The hell with her. Jeff, pull yourself together. We've got to go. We've got to find Sally Kennedy."

"Yes," he said. He shook his head and took a deep breath. He picked up my coat off the floor and held it for me.

We lifted the door and ducked under it. Jeff was slamming it back when I remembered the gun. "Jeff, she had a gun! We might need . . ." A lock clicked inside. The door was tightly, securely closed.

"We won't need a gun," Jeff said. "We'll be on our way before she comes to, before anyone can move."

"Jeff, is she locked in?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. Let's go. Are you all right, Haila?"

"I'll do. How are you?"

"As well as could be expected."

"I'm sorry about the door, but it was your own fault. That'll teach you to stay away from redheads."

"Did you do that? Shake down the door?"

"Of course. You know me. Jealous."

We started back toward the hotel. "Did you find anything out from Red? Did she say anything?"

"Nothing that will help us. She bribed Kramer to get in here . . . gave him five hundred dollars to hide her out. She must have known that we'd stay here looking for her until it would be too late to help Sally Kennedy, until it was all over. Then . . ."

Jeff held open the door into the dark wing of the hotel. I stepped by him and waited while he eased shut the door behind us. I found his arm and hung onto it. I wasn't going to be separated again from Jeff, ever again.

"What are we going to do?" I whispered.

"See Kramer right away. We'll have him put a call through to New York, to Police Headquarters. They'll take care of Sally. Then we'll get the hell out of here."

"Sally Kennedy," I said, "is sailing blithely somewhere around town. She doesn't know what's going to happen to her tomorrow morning. She can't know, can she?"

"I guess not."

"We should phone her first. Then the police."

"Yes. All right, we'll do it that way."

We found Kramer at the reception desk in the lobby. He was fiddling half-heartedly with some papers, as if paper work was beneath a hotel man of his genius. He raised his head and shook a manicured finger at us.

"You promised me you would come to dinner," he said. "I waited as long as possible. It's too late now, I'm afraid."

"We don't want dinner," Jeff said. He nodded toward the switchboard behind the desk. "We want to put a call through to New York. The Sultan Hotel."

Kramer smiled gently. "You want to call New York?"

"Yes. It's important."

"Just like that. It's important. You want to call New York." The hotel manager suddenly lost his patient attitude; he became stern. "If you, Mr. Troy, if you and your charming wife behaved like normal guests instead of disappearing to heaven knows where every fifteen minutes, you would know about the telephone."

"Tell us about the telephone."

"It is out. There is no telephone. The line is down somewhere or other. And, personally, in weather like this I don't blame the line for being down. If I were a line, I should be down, too."

"Where is the nearest phone," Jeff said, "that might still be working?"

"There isn't one between here and the village. And how you would get to the village tonight I have no idea."

"Mr. Kramer," Jeff said, "we've caused you a lot of trouble. I don't have time to explain, but we've got to get out of here. We've got to get to the village and to New York. There's someone there who's in trouble. We might be able to . . . to save her life. If you help us."

"Save whose life?"

Jeff started to say Sally Kennedy, then changed his mind. It would

take too many minutes to explain to the hotel manager who was and who was not Sally Kennedy. He said, "Kramer, can you get us a car to take us to the village?"

"Who would be fool enough to drive on a night like this, Mr. Troy? The roads are positively suicidal."

"All right," Jeff said, "then we'll walk."

"Walk!" Kramer's eyebrows raised in horror. "You would never make it, not in a million years!"

"We'll manage somehow. Ready, Haila?"

Kramer put out a restraining hand. "Wait . . . wait just a minute. Our caretaker has a car. He might . . . he just might be persuaded to risk his neck and drive you two into town."

"We'll pay him whatever he asks."

"There's only a chance that he'll do it. But if you insist on attempting to walk it, I'll speak to him."

His voice dwindled off as he hurried away. He went through the taproom and into the kitchen. In five minutes he was back, his face set in the smile of a man who can work wonders and just had.

"It's all fixed!" he cried, "All fixed. Now don't let him hold you up, Mr. Troy. Ten dollars, I think, will be plenty. He'll bring the car around immediately. I told him you were ready and waiting."

"Thanks," Jeff said, "that's fine."

"Not at all. Will you be coming back with him, after you make your phone call?"

"No," Jeff said. "We'll settle our bill now."

"Your bill? What bill? You've had no dinner, you haven't used your room. A bill for what?" He smiled humorously at us. "Perhaps I should fine you for trespassing, but I certainly can't charge you for room and board."

An automobile horn sounded outside.

"There he is," Kramer said.

He saw us to the door, shook hands, and pooh-poohed away our thanks. The two elderly ladies, tending to their needlework by the fireplace, waved good-bye to us. Merrill, his florid face even more flushed with good food and drink, roared a farewell from the dining room. Kramer opened the door and we took our leave of Chappawan Lodge.

The car, a small sedan, looked forlorn and lost in the stormy night. Its headlights, one of which was askew and errantly pointing sky-

ward, managed to pierce no more than ten feet of the swirling snow. The caretaker was behind the wheel. Bundled to the ears in a sheepskin coat, he waved a gloved paw to us and motioned us into the back seat. Jeff put one foot on the running board.

He said, "You want ten dollars to take us to Chappawan?"

"That's right," the driver said.

"You think you'll have any trouble driving . . ." He stopped. I saw him take a quick backward step away from the car. When he spoke again, his voice was tight. "Ten dollars," he said. "That seems like a lot of money."

"Make it five," the driver said.

"No," Jeff said. "Five's too much. We'll skip the whole thing." He reached in through the door and his hand gripped my wrist. "Come on, Haila, we'll go back."

Startled, I slid toward the door and, in the mirror above the windshield, my eyes met the driver's. They were blinking, fluttering eyes, set too close to a long, sharp nose. I had seen that face before. I had seen it that afternoon on the train to Chappawan.

He had talked to us on the train, he had crossed the aisle to force upon us a photograph of himself. It was because of him that we had almost missed seeing the red-headed girl escape from the train.

I let Jeff pull me from the car and lead me back up the hotel steps. I knew then that it had been no coincidence that we had been drawn into conversation with the man. It had been no accident that the girl had nearly eluded us. This man was a part of the plan, this plan that was to end with the murder of Sally Kennedy.

The black sedan was still under the porte cochere. The driver sat stolidly behind the wheel, his ferret face in profile to us. He made no move to start the engine.

"Jeff . . ." I said. I tried to keep my voice steady. "Jeff, what would happen if we just walked past the car and down the road?"

"I think," he said, "and this is only my opinion, of course, that the car would follow us. When we were far enough from the hotel so that the people in the lobby wouldn't hear two shots ring out, two shots would ring out. One for you, one for me."

"We would be . . . killed," I said.

"Our bodies would never be found."

"And tomorrow morning Sally Kennedy would be murdered."

"It would be inexcusable inefficiency," Jeff said, "if they killed us and then missed out on Sally."

"All right," I said. "We won't walk past that car and down the road."

"It's up to you, Haila." Jeff put his hand on the lobby door; I put my hand on his.

"Wait," I said.

"What is it?"

"Kramer . . . he arranged this ride for us. That means he's in the gang."

"Yes, I'm afraid so. I hoped he wasn't so he could help us. But there's too much about his connection with the redhead that doesn't make sense. Unless he's one of them."

"Kramer," I said, "the redhead, the driver there. That's three. And how many more people inside are a part of it?"

"There's no way of knowing, Haila."

"This place must be their hideaway . . . or their headquarters."

"Yes."

I caught Jeff's hand again and held tight to it. "Jeff, do we . . . do we have to go back inside?"

"It's the only thing we can do. Our only chance is to go in and then get out again without their knowing."

"But somehow I'd rather not go in at all."

Jeff turned me so that I could see over his shoulder. The car was still there, the man still in the driver's seat. He was motionless, waiting. He looked as if he didn't mind at all waiting. He seemed, in fact, rather to enjoy it.

I quickly opened the door that led back into the hotel lobby.

15

THEY WERE ALL BACK IN THE lobby now, all but the mother and the pigtailed child. They were crowded together about the fireplace in a tableau of cozy friendliness, a group of innocent people sitting out a winter storm in a

family hotel. But any one of them, or all of them, might be a link in the murderous chain that was tightening around Sally Kennedy.

The shy, wide-eyed eagerness of Mary Thompson seemed suddenly to be a screen that covered a killer's face. Trask's old world grace, the heartiness of Merrill might be masks for intentions that were sinister. Even the needles of the two spinster ladies, as I watched them dance in their fingers, took on the wickedness of deadly weapons. I shivered and edged closer to Jeff. My only comfort was that the hotel manager was not in sight. The sight of him and his elaborate preciousness would have been more than I could have stood.

Merrill called to us from his big chair beside the hearth.

"What's the trouble, Mr. Troy? The weather too bad for traveling?"

"Yes," Jeff said, "much too bad."

They were all looking at us now. The two ladies stopped their needles and held them suspended between stitches. Trask turned in his seat to face us; Mary Thompson popped up on her knees and looked over the high back of her chair. Merrill rose and took a step toward us.

"Come and sit by the fire," he said.

"Yes," Mary Thompson chirped, "yes, please do!"

"We were talking about you," Trask said. There was an amused smile on his face. "Did you find your friend who did not, as it turned out, steal Miss Thompson's name to use as an alias?"

"Yes, did you find her?" Miss Thompson asked. "I do so want to meet her."

"No," Jeff said, "we didn't find her."

"Young man," the knitter cried, "are you and your wife in trouble?"

"Come here," the crocheter said, "and tell us all about it. We may be able to help you."

The two old ladies moved to opposite ends of their settee, making room for Jeff and me between them. Their eyes were bright, greedy with their curiosity.

"People should help each other," the knitter said.

Numbly, I started toward them when Jeff's hand caught my arm.

"Thank you," he said, "but we were on our way to the bar. You

know, a nightcap."

He was steering me away from them, out of the lobby. I could feel their eyes on our backs, following each step that we took. They were quiet behind us. We reached the bar and Jeff bounced the palm of his hand on the bell. Then I heard their voices, all speaking at once, muted but excited.

I said, "Jeff, I don't want a drink, I couldn't . . ."

"Order something," Jeff said. "Anything."

The boy was hurrying in from the kitchen. He blinked at us and rubbed his eyes, grinning sheepishly. We had rung him out of a stolen nap. He said, "Yes, sir?"

Jeff looked at me.

I said, "I'll have something warm. A . . . a hot rum toddy."

"Two," Jeff said.

"Two rum toddies, yes, sir. That'll take a few minutes."

The boy ducked through the swinging door beside the bar and disappeared into the kitchen. The voices, still soft, went on in the lobby. I turned sidewise and glanced toward them. No one had moved. The knitter and the crocheter were working, but their eyes were on us. Trask was watching us, the amused smile still playing on his lips. Merrill caught my eye and nodded.

Jeff was talking softly, hardly moving his lips. "When your drink comes, pick it up. Act as though we're heading for a booth."

"What will we be heading for?"

"The kitchen. Maybe we can get out through the kitchen."

"Yes. Kitchens have outside doors. They always have. . . ."

The boy was back. Silently he placed two steaming glass cups before us and left. I raised my cup, gulped at it. Then, the cup still in my hand, I started toward the booth. Jeff followed me. We cleared the arch of the lobby and right-turned. We paused by the booth. No footsteps crossed the lobby floor, no voice was raised. We took ten quick steps and moved into the kitchen.

It was being tidied for the night. A bedraggled, aching woman was laboriously drying pots and pans and hanging them on hooks. A burly gentleman in the professional white of a chef was cleaning the long gas range. The waiter was wearily sorting silverware. Just inside the swinging door the bar boy was perched in a chair that was tilted up against the wall. And at a table across the kitchen, hunched over a cup of coffee, sat the girl with red hair.

She glanced up at us, then quickly looked back down at her cup. Her body stiffened, her face became hard, expressionless. Now there was nothing feminine about her. Her smudged makeup looked like a false face that was meant to be funny and wasn't. She seemed a small, ugly animal, wanting to strike out, knowing it was wiser to wait.

It was the chef who spoke.

"Something you want?" His voice was gruff. "Too late now for anything to eat."

"They don't want anything to eat," the girl said.

The chef turned to her in surprise. She was looking down again into her cup of coffee. He wasn't sure that it had been she who spoke.

"You said something?"

"I said they don't want anything to eat," she said. "Can't you see they've got their hats and coats? They're leaving. They're looking for a way out."

She raised her eyes and looked directly at us. She jerked a thumb over her shoulder, and the gesture hurt her. She said, "There's a door right there. It leads outside."

The words were half-invitation, half-dare, and they were completely chilling. My insides turned suddenly glacial.

"No," Jeff said, "we're not leaving. In fact, we were looking for something to eat. We see it's too late."

The girl, the bewildered members of the kitchen staff watched us back out of the room. Jeff held the swinging door open with one hand, steered me through it with the other. I was still holding my hot toddy and I took two long quick pulls on it. It didn't do a thing about melting the ice in my stomach. Jeff started across the bar toward the lobby. I grabbed at him.

"No, Jeff! Not back in there. I can't . . . I can't face them all again, watching us, waiting for us to move. . . ."

Jeff put his arm around me. "We'll have to, Haila. We've got to get upstairs and see what we can do from there. They can't be everywhere."

"They can," I said. "They are."

I took another fast, final sip of my drink, set it on the bar and followed Jeff out of the taproom. They didn't see us enter the lobby. The group at the fireplace had tightened into a circle surrounding

Merrill. The knitter was standing on tiptoe before him, using him as a model for the scarf she was making. The two other women were exclaiming over the wonderful contrast the bright blue of the scarf made with the silver white of Merrill's hair. Trask, leaning against the mantle, smiled at his friend's embarrassment. No one turned as we crossed the room.

I didn't feel the watchful eyes upon me until we started up the stairs. I turned quickly. In a far corner of the room, from where he could see both the stairway and the front door, sat Kramer. There was a wide-open newspaper spread over his lap and now his eyes were fastened on it.

Just before the wall of the stairwell shut him from my view I glanced back again. Again he was watching us, a little smile pursing his thin lips.

Jeff closed the door of our room and snapped shut the inside lock. I sank down on the edge of the bed. The pressure of the last thirty-six hours, the lack of food was beginning to catch up with me. Jeff's voice was anxious.

"Haila. . . ."

"I'm all right," I said. "But turn on some lights. I've developed a craving for nice, bright lights. I'm anti-darkness."

"I think," Jeff said, "we'd better keep it dark."

"Why? They know we're here, they know . . ."

He had moved to the window and opened it wide.

"Is it far to the ground, Jeff?"

He didn't answer.

I felt my way across the room and stood beside him. The courtyard lay still and white beneath us. The tall, narrow blur of darkness close against the wall looked at first like a shadow. Then it moved and I saw the figure of a man. He stepped away from the wall, raised his head toward our window. Then, quickly, he stepped back again into the shadow of the wall, flattening himself against it.

Gently, Jeff pulled shut the window.

I said, "There must be some other way. They can't be watching the whole building."

"Yes," Jeff said. "There's a staircase at the end of the other wing. I found it this evening. I don't know, though, if there's an exit from that wing. If there isn't, we might be able to get down into the cellar and . . ."

"Let's . . . let's try it."

Jeff took my hand. "You sound as if you would rather not."

I thought of Sally Kennedy. I thought of Frank Lorimer's limp body as they lifted him off the subway tracks and of Joyce's voice at a telephone in Union Square and of tomorrow morning. Eleven o'clock tomorrow morning.

I said, "No. Let's go."

Noiselessly, Jeff opened the door and we sidled out into the hall. On tiptoe we started down the hall; we would have to cross the landing above the lobby in order to reach the far wing. Jeff took three steps and stopped dead.

I had seen it, too. Across the corridor from us, a door inched open, hung silently there. It closed again, smoothly, still silently, but we knew.

We went back to our room.

Jeff closed the door, locked it. With a shrug he switched on the lights. "It doesn't matter now."

"We can't move."

"Not at the moment."

"Jeff, if we stay here, what will they do? Oh, I know they'll kill Sally Kennedy. There'll be nobody to stop them. But what about us? They have to kill us, don't they? We know so much. We know about Kramer. We know about Joyce and the redhead . . . we know about the redhead and Joyce and the red . . ."

"Haila!"

The lights seemed to fade and glow again. The room began to spin around me.

"Jeff. . . ."

I felt his hands on my arms, gripping them. His voice was metallic, piercing. I didn't like him at all. He was annoying me.

"Haila! How much of that drink did you have?"

"That drink? Some of it . . . all of it. Why?"

"Haila, don't let yourself go. Keep fighting it. Walk, Haila, walk around the room."

I stood up. I forced myself to put one leg in front of the other. I felt better.

"I'm all right," I said. "I'm . . . Jeff, was that drink doped? But it couldn't have been. You had one, you don't feel anything, do you? It's just because I'm so tired, I'm exhausted. . . ."

Jeff's hands were on my shoulders, forcing me to walk.

"I didn't drink anything," he said.

"You didn't . . ."

"I left it in the kitchen."

"You should have drunk it. It was delicious. It was warm. Oh, Jeff, I'm so sleepy."

"Fight it, kid! Listen, Haila. Haila, are you listening to me?"

"Yes, I'm listening."

"Once," Jeff said, "once when I was about sixteen, being large for my age, I was a counselor at a boys' camp. It was a big camp. There must have been two hundred and fifty boys there. Haila, how many boys were there?"

"Two hundred and fifty boys."

"That's a girl, sweetheart, stay with me!"

"Two hundred and fifty boys," I said again. I wanted Jeff to be proud of me. I wanted him to be proud of me more than anything else in the world. That, in fact, was all I wanted in the world. "Two hundred and fifty boys," I said.

"Not counting Tippy Larkin," Jeff continued.

"Two hundred and fifty-one boys."

"No, Tippy wasn't a boy. He was an old, old man. He lived in a little hut on the camp grounds and they couldn't get him off. They had bought the land from him and . . . Haila! Who did they buy the land from?"

"Whom, Jeff, not who. Whom did they buy the land from? They bought the land from Tippy Larkin. Tippy. I knew a girl once named Tippy. We were both in love with the same boy and . . ."

"Go on, Haila, go on! What was the boy's name?"

"None of your business. None of your . . ."

"Fight it, Haila! Tell me about the boy."

"Well, his name was Fred Leeder. His full name was Frederick. Well, Fred invited me to go to the senior dance and I couldn't go. I didn't have a long dress. Why couldn't I go to the dance, Jeff?"

"Because you didn't have a long dress."

"That's a boy, Jeff, fight it . . . fight it . . . fight. . ."

"Haila, stay awake! Please stay awake! I'll give you anything you want if you stay awake!"

"I want a long dress. A real long dress . . ."

"Sweetheart, get up! Walk!"

"No, I can't . . . I don't have a thing to wear. . . ."

"Haila, listen to me . . . Haila. . . ."

His voice trailed off. I tried to do as he asked but the effort was too great . . . and I didn't care. I was whirling . . . whirling . . . I was falling asleep as I had never fallen asleep before . . . and it was wonderful. . . .

16

I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I HAD been awake. I only knew that I was lying on a bed in a dark room, staring up at a dark ceiling. I knew that and then, all at once, I knew everything. I was in a hotel on a mountain top. I was here because a girl named Sally Kennedy was to be murdered. . . . I sat up.

I was alone in the room.

It was dark, but not so dark that I couldn't see into each corner of the small, square bedroom. Jeff wasn't there. He would never have voluntarily gone away, leaving me to lie drugged, to come to and find him gone, or not to come to. Somehow they had separated us. They had got Jeff.

I pulled myself to my feet. A door squealed softly on its hinges and quickly I dropped back on the bed. I closed my eyes and lay perfectly still. Feet shuffled across the carpet and stopped beside the bed.

I must be convincing, I must still appear to be in my drugged stupor. I had to be left alone again so that I could search for Jeff. . . .

Motion stirred the air above my eyes. A cold, wet cloth was clamped down on my forehead. They were trying to bring me to. It was no longer their plan to keep me immobilized. . . . I heard a voice, low, solemn. At first the words were indistinguishable, then they were not.

". . . I promise to take better care of her in the future. I won't even let her feet get wet. I won't cross against a red light when she's with me. . . ."

I didn't budge. I didn't want to break this up. It was doing me a world of good.

". . . I won't let her ride planes or fast trains, or elevateds or subways. I won't let her out of the house. We'll stay in every night and listen to the radio. . . ."

"Now wait a minute," I said.

"Haila!"

"As usual, you have to overdo it."

"Darling, how do you feel?"

"I'll be all right if you take that wet, clammy rag off my head."

"I'm sorry."

"How long have I been out?"

"Hours. It's damn near dawn."

"Dawn? Jeff, what have you been reading while I was unconscious? Jeff, did you say . . . dawn? We've got to do something! We've got to get out of here . . . Sally . . ."

There was the creak of a floorboard in the hall outside. Jeff flung himself on the bed beside me, stretched himself full length.

"They're coming back," he whispered. "You're out, Haila, you're doped."

I was getting good at this sort of thing. Once more I closed my eyes and lay very still. Beside me I heard Jeff breathing deeply, regularly, and I let my breathing rise and fall in step with his.

There were muffled, stealthy steps in the hall outside, but the door remained closed. Through my closed eyelids I could feel the room suddenly brighten. I could feel the beam of light land smack on my face, hold there for a moment, then move away. My eyelids turned black again. There was a little thud in the hall, a scuffling sound of footsteps and then silence.

Jeff's hand closed on mine and squeezed a warning. We lay motionless.

"All right," Jeff's whispered, "it's all right now."

"What was going on?"

"They were inspecting us through the transom."

"Has that happened before?"

"Often. But each time they've found me awake."

"Could you see who it was?"

"No." He got off the bed and started for the window. "I'm hoping that finding us both asleep now will take them off their guard. That

guy under the window can't stay out much longer. He must be frozen."

"Oh, I hope not, I sincerely hope not!"

"Nobody has taken over for him all night!"

"Jeff, are you feeling sorry for him?"

"Only sorry enough to want him to go inside for a while."

Jeff stayed at the window; I moved over to his side and looked out. It had stopped snowing and there was a trace of what Jeff referred to nowadays as dawn in the sky. But it was still dark enough to make the man against the wall of the courtyard only a blurred figure. We waited long minutes, minutes that seemed hours, for what Jeff was hoping for would happen. Then a window in the wall opposite the man was quietly raised. We watched him tramp through the snow toward it. He paused for a moment beside it, listening, then he moved away, out of the court.

Jeff's hand clamped on my wrist. "Haila, do you think you can make it? Now? There mightn't be much time."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, let's go."

Jeff had the blankets torn off the bed; he was stripping off the two sheets. He knotted them together, looped the end of one around the leg of the radiator beside the window, fastened it securely. Cautiously, he opened the window, waited a moment, then lowered the rope of twisted sheets through it.

I had put on my hat and coat; I handed Jeff his. I waited while he sat on the window sill and swung his legs across it. "All my life," he said, "I've wanted to try this." He started down. I leaned out the window, watching him until he hit the ground. He motioned to me.

I had a moment's qualm. I hadn't spent all my life wanting to try this. But it was easy. I kept my legs tight around the material and lowered myself hand over hand until Jeff reached up and took me in his arms. He put me down and I sank almost to my knees in the snow. We stood and listened. There was no sound and, from the hotel, no glimmer of light. Slowly, carefully, we edged our way toward the right wing and worked the length of its wall. A few feet from the corner of the building we stopped and reconnoitered.

Thirty feet ahead of us, across the lawn of the Lodge, stood a row of bushes and hedge. Once across those thirty feet we would be safe . . . or at least, much safer.

Jeff put his lips to my ear. "How do you feel?"

"Better every minute. This air."

"Ready?"

I nodded.

Jeff grasped my wrist. We both took one step and stopped dead. From around the corner came the man with the blinking eyes. He was as startled to see us as we were to see him. His mouth fell open and he stood still, eighteen inches away, gaping at us. Then his right hand reached into his right overcoat pocket.

Jeff hit him. He hit him in the stomach with one hand, on the point of his chin with the other. The man bent over, then straightened, then crumpled slowly into a heap. His eyes weren't blinking now; they were wide open and only the whites of them showed. He looked dreadful but, for him, it was a definite improvement and, for us, a great convenience.

We ran.

We ducked low and plunged forward through the deep snow toward the sanctuary of the hedge. Our pace was maddeningly slow. I found myself waiting for a shout, for the crack of an exploding gun. It wouldn't hurt, the bullet would merely knock me flat, it wouldn't hurt until later. That was too soon. I dug in harder and pushed ahead. Jeff had hold of my wrist, he was dragging me along. The branch of a bush slapped smartly across my face and it felt wonderful.

We knelt down, out of view of the hotel behind us, and caught our breath. There was still no light visible inside the Lodge. There was no one to be seen except a man sprawled on the snow, and he was a dark, motionless mound.

"It's all right, Haila," Jeff said. "We're all right."

"Yes. So far."

"Ready to get moving again?"

"Yes."

The road was fifty yards off to our left. The hedge row ran all the way to it. We started moving, each step a struggle against the drifted snow and underbrush. The front of the Lodge came into view. From the lobby shone the soft glow of a solitary lamp. We crouched lower, moved more cautiously.

Once I wallowed to my waist in a drift. Jeff dug me out. Once he missed his footing and went sprawling. But the road came closer and closer and then we were wading through its ditch and stand-

ing on its snowed-under surface. We started down it.

There had been just enough night traffic on the road to pack down four tire-wide tracks. It made the going easier, we made good time . . . better time than I could stand. It hit me suddenly. I was winded, exhausted, my legs refused to do any more than just hold me up. Jeff led me over to the cable guard rail on the left of the road and I half sat on its top strand.

I glanced down behind me and then, quickly, I put my hands on the cable and held on. The road here was a shelf blasted out of sheer rock cliff. Before us it rose smoothly up out of sight in the darkness, behind us it dropped straight away, a black pit. I didn't look behind me again.

Jeff lit a cigarette. It smelled good and warm and, after a moment, my lungs were in condition to ask for one. It was almost pleasant sitting there. The darkness no longer seemed terror-ridden; it was a protection, a comfort. It was on our side now.

"Jeff, what time do you think it is?"

"It gets light about seven-thirty. It must be nearly seven."

"If it takes us an hour to get to the village, then two hours to New York . . ." I stood up. "Jeff, we haven't much time."

"I know. We should keep moving."

I heard the drone of the car before I saw it. It was coming down the mountain toward us. The sound of its obviously ancient motor was lovely, lilting music to my ears. "Jeff!" I called, "Jeff, it's a lift. . . ." I started to the opposite side of the road.

Jeff caught me by the shoulder and, as he did, I saw what he had seen. The car was still out of sight around the curve above us, but its headlights spilled out before it, cutting into the black abyss beyond the road. One of them was parallel with the road, the other shot upwards at a forty-five degree angle. The car that had waited for us in front of Chappawan Lodge. The car whose chauffeur had been the man with the nervous eyes.

There was no shelter for us. We were caught on a narrow white ribbon between two cliffs. The headlights would pick us out as easily as if we were a vaudeville duo on an empty stage.

We started running, away from the lights, away from the sound of the motor that grew stronger behind us. I was gasping, stumbling, fighting to keep moving. Jeff dragged me along. The lights would soon touch our heels, move up our backs until we were

pinioned by them, two black targets against the whiteness of the snow.

Ahead of us the road twisted in a sharp bend. Behind us the car's motor was clear now, growing louder, rising in a terrible crescendo.

We rounded the bend and there was nothing, no sign of shelter to the right or left. Jeff broke away from me. He vaulted the guard rail and leaned out into the darkness. He turned back to me.

"Haila! Here!"

He pulled me across the cables, led me the three steps to the brink of the drop. He said, "Jump."

"No," I said.

The motor was a roar in the quiet morning. The lights stabbed into the gloom before us, fingers of light on a great black curtain. The car had started around the bend. Jeff put both hands on my shoulders. He pushed me out and down into the hideous, yawning gulf.

There was no time for me to scream. My mouth was filled too soon with snow. I was sprawling, floundering in a pit of it. I felt Jeff as he thudded down beside me. I blew the snow out of my mouth and listened.

The car was just above us, its motor churning. It didn't stop. In a few minutes it was only a muffled, far-away drone.

I sat up. Jeff lifted me to my feet and I was standing in a drift up to my hips. He brushed off my face. He was smiling down at me with relief, a little affection, a little more amusement.

"You might have told me," I said, "that there was a ledge here."

"I was afraid you might ask me how wide it was."

"How wide is it?"

"About five feet."

"Five feet . . . I won't faint . . . I won't faint . . . I . . . Jeff, what if I had jumped clear over it?"

"You never jumped five feet in your life. Besides, I pushed you. I pushed you lovingly and gently."

"Let's get out of here," I said, "before we're attacked by eagles."

We worked our way along the ledge until we found a place where we could scramble back up on the road. We beat the snow off each other and started walking again. I was too hopped-up by my leap into the unknown to be tired now; I was too glad to be

able to walk not to walk. I strode along almost briskly.

Jeff said, "Look."

I knew from his voice that this would be something good to see. Moving toward us, so slowly that its motor was a murmur, was a small dump truck. A spasmodic shower of cinders flew from its rear and landed on the road. It was a highway squad.

From the cab of the truck a red-faced man grinned down at us. We grinned back at him, so heartily that he was slightly bewildered. He reached for the brake and pulled the machine to a stop.

"You're out kinda late, ain't you?"

"Kind of early," Jeff said. "We have to catch a train for New York. Could you . . ."

"Hop in!" He pushed open the door on the far side. We ran around to it and hopped in beside him. "Guess you're after the seven thirty-five."

"That's right," Jeff said.

"Well, now, we'll soon be rid of this load of ashes and then we can make some time. You'll get your train."

"If it's out of your way I'll be glad to pay . . ."

"Not a bit! Chappawan is where we load up again."

The truck crept along for several hundred yards, then there was a thump on the cab roof as one of the shovelers signaled the driver. He carefully maneuvered the truck through a U-turn. We were facing Chappawan. We picked up as much speed as the dangerous road allowed and we were rolling down the mountain.

Chappawan lay just below us when the black sedan emerged from a curve and climbed the slope toward us. Jeff ducked below the level of the dashboard.

"My glove," he muttered, "I dropped my glove."

"I'll help you find it," I said.

I bent low beside him. My head between my knees, I scrabbled around the floor with one hand. The sound of the black sedan's motor joined the sound of the truck's. There was a roar as the other car came opposite the open cab of our's. I lifted one eye above Jeff's shoulder.

Blinky was in the driver's seat, his head bent over the wheel. Beyond him I could see a flash of red hair. They made a cute couple. They would have looked especially cute standing above us with

guns in their hands while we wallowed below on a five-foot ledge. Jeff and I straightened up. We peered out the back window. We heaved sighs of gratitude.

"Find your glove?" the driver asked.

"Yeah," Jeff said.

I leaned back in my seat. "May I have a cigarette? I'd love a cigarette."

"Mind if we smoke?" Jeff asked the driver.

"Not a bit."

"We'll be careful not to get ashes all over your truck."

The driver laughed. "That's rich," he said. "That's really rich."

Ahead of us the covered bridge hove into sight. We rattled through it. The town of Chappawan was just awaking. There were lights in kitchen windows. A boy was throwing newspapers at front doors. Some men were digging free their garage doors. We rounded the corner into the main street; the store fronts were still closed and dark. We pulled up before the station.

"Here we are!" the driver chirped. "With five minutes to spare."

We thanked the man, profoundly, from the bottom of our hearts.

"Look," he said, "all I give you was a ride."

He tipped his hat, the shovelers waved, and the truck wheeled on. We went into the station.

In the center of the small room stood a fat-bellied coal stove. It was unlit, cold and black, but two men and an elderly woman had crowded around it, as if to get some warmth from its reputation. To our left was a ticket office; its window was closed.

Jeff said, "I've got to find a phone booth. Quick."

I looked around. "There doesn't seem to be one."

He went to the ticket office window and tried to look through its frosted glass. The woman glanced at Jeff. She called to him and her voice was loud and friendly.

"You'll have to buy your tickets on the train."

The door opened and slammed shut behind us as a short, stocky man stamped into the waiting room. His heavy cheeks glistened with the cold. He thrust out his lower lip and blew the tears out of his thick-browed eyes. Jeff and I turned back to the woman.

Jeff said, "Is there any way to make a phone call from here? Or from near here?"

"If you waited until the office opened . . . but then you would miss your train, wouldn't you? It's due in a few minutes."

Her cheerful face darkened in thought. Her companions were thinking, too. Everyone in the station became interested in solving our problem. We didn't tell them that this phone call might save a girl's life. We didn't tell them that and yet they were behaving as though our call was the most important thing in the world. It was nice, it was warming. It was a fine antidote for the low opinion of human nature that had been forming inside me for the last two days.

The woman said, "The gas station has a phone and it's open now. But it's so far. I'm afraid you'd miss your train."

"Wait a minute," one of the men said. "Would a telegram do just as well?"

"But he can't send a wire," the woman said, "until Mr. Morton opens the office at eight."

"He can write out the message," the man said, "and leave it with the money at the window there. Morton will send it when he comes in. I've known Morton for forty-five years, fifty years. I went to school with him. He's reliable."

"All right," Jeff said, "I'll do that."

The frozen little man stopped beating his hands together. "I'll see he sends your wire," he said. "My train don't get in till after eight."

"Thanks," Jeff said, "thanks."

A whistle, moaning and eerie, sounded in the distance.

"You'll have to hurry!" the woman cried. "Have you got pencil and paper?"

"Yes," Jeff said.

Hastily he scribbled his wire, a message to Hankins at New York Police Headquarters. He folded it around a pair of dollar bills and tucked it in the crevice beneath the ticket window. The conductor was shouting "All aboard!" as we ran across the platform. He followed us up the steps, the train jerked to a start, and Chappawan was behind us.

I settled back into my seat. My head was throbbing now, my eyes burning, my feet were wet and cold. But for the first time in thirty-six hours I felt at ease. In half an hour Hankins would have Jeff's wire. He would know that the girl who needed his protection was

Sally Kennedy at the Hotel Sultan. In a few minutes more he would be on his way to her.

I put my head on Jeff's shoulder and closed my eyes. Our responsibility was ended. Sally Kennedy's life was in far better hands than ours. For the first time I knew surely that she would not die.

My head bounced off Jeff's shoulder and I was wrenched awake with a jolt. I glanced out the window. The train was moving slowly along in the stone-walled slot of upper New York. Everything was all right. I looked at Jeff. His face was white, his lips drawn in a tight line. I knew that everything was not all right.

I said, "Jeff, what is it?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe I'm wrong. I hope so."

"Jeff . . ."

"Listen, Haila. The day before yesterday . . . when we first heard from Frank Lorimer . . . he asked us to meet him at the Belfast Bar . . ."

"Yes?"

"He couldn't talk to us there, he had to slip us a note. He couldn't talk to us at the Belfast . . . because there was a member of the gang at the Belfast. . . ."

"Yes, Jeff?"

"It's been a long time since then, Haila, but try to think back. Think hard. Can you remember any of the people in the Belfast then? Can you remember who was there?"

I thought back. I remembered the jovial bartender and the old, sweet-faced sweeper who had been Frank Lorimer. I remembered the drunk who had talked to us. There had been several people in the booths and a little, stinky man who had come to the bar beside us and ordered drinks . . . I saw his chubby, blooming face, his bushy eyebrows. . . .

"Jeff, no! Jeff, the little man in the Chappawan Station . . . was he . . ."

"Yes."

"The little man who volunteered to take care of your telegram to Hankins."

"Yes," Jeff said, "he's taken care of it by now."

The train moved along through the Bronx. A clock hanging outside a store slid by us. It said nine twenty-five. In one hour and thirty-five minutes it would be eleven o'clock.

The police had not got Jeff's wire. Hankins didn't know what eleven o'clock would mean for Sally Kennedy. Sally Kennedy didn't know.

Only Jeff and I could help her now. And we were on a train, a train that moved slowly, haltingly, over the middle of the Harlem River.

17

ALL THE WAY INTO THE 125TH Street station, our train marked time. Inching along, jerking to a complete stop, then crawling on again. I found myself pressing my knees against the seat before me, subconsciously trying to use my weight to keep us moving. Under his breath Jeff muttered things that I was glad I couldn't hear.

Then, at last, the train went into a sprint, a sprint that carried us into the station. Before we had stopped Jeff was down the steps of our coach and onto the station platform. He ran along it, his hand extended to me. I hit the platform, stumbled into a run and kept on going. We were the first to reach the stairs, the way before us was clear.

Jeff was ahead of me, almost to the street, when he stopped. I piled into him.

"Jeff, what . . ."

He was turning me around, pushing me back.

"Joyce," he said.

Even before he spoke, I had seen him. He was standing in a position from which he could watch both flights of stairs to the street. He wasn't leaning indolently against a wall, a cigarette drooping from his lips. He was crouched forward, on his toes. Then he was coming toward us, running to beat the truck that would momentarily block his way. His right hand was in the breast of his overcoat, fumbling there.

I stumbled on the steps and fell. Jeff caught me around my waist. My feet only touched every third step as he dragged me up

with him. Halfway to the top we met the first of our train's ex-passengers. We struggled through them to the platform. The train was creeping out of the station when we clambered back on it. Jeff waited on the bottom step, leaning out to look back. Then he climbed up, into the car.

"We made it," he said. "He's still back there."

"He'll take a cab. He'll beat us to Grand Central."

"No. It can't be done . . . not without a police escort."

We started forward, to the front of the train, closer to the street when we reached Grand Central. It would take ten minutes to get there, ten more to reach the Sultan Hotel. It would be quarter after ten, forty-five minutes before eleven o'clock. We still had a chance, Sally Kennedy still had a chance. We stopped on the rear platform of the smoker, at the door farthest forward.

Through the window we watched the lights click by in the tunneled wall. I counted off the streets above us . . . Eighty-fifth Street . . . Eighty-fourth . . . I knew that I was counting too fast. We would be at Sixty-eighth Street and then, after that, we would be moving away from Sally Kennedy, moving away while the minutes ticked off.

In the coach behind us people began to fold their newspapers, reach for their hats and coats. The door at the other end of the coach swung open and on its platform I saw him. I saw the short, stocky figure before it jerked back out of sight, the eyes under the bushy brows staring at me. I caught Jeff's hand.

"It's Shorty," I said. "He's on the next platform."

Jeff's face was white. "We'll have to run for it. We've got a one car jump on him. We'll have to keep that lead."

"People will get between us," I said. "That should help."

"How do you feel, Haila?"

"Like running away from Shorty."

"Are you frightened?"

"Of course."

"I hope that tidbit about fear lending wings isn't a lot of propaganda."

"Jeff, he can't do anything to us in broad daylight! In the middle of New York City!"

"He doesn't have any choice. They've got to get us now . . . anyway or anyplace they can. We know too much."

"I wish that tidbit about a little knowledge would turn out to be a lot of propaganda."

The train slowed for Grand Central. Jeff folded up the floorboard and opened the door. We were alongside the platforms now, but still moving fast. Slowly, the speed slackened and Jeff jumped. I followed him. We didn't look back; we ran.

We ran up a ramp and into the main waiting room. It was crowded, jammed with people. We weaved crazily through them. A wag yelled at us that we were running in the wrong direction, that the trains were the other way. We brushed past him, up the stairs toward the arcade where the taxis were lined.

A girl was getting out of the first cab. A porter took her bags from the rear seat while she fumbled in her purse. Jeff pushed her aside. "This is on me," he said. I was in the cab and Jeff was beside me. He slammed shut the door and showed the driver a ten dollar bill. He told him that we wanted to go to the Sultan Hotel. He told him that we were in a hurry.

The cab pulled out into Vanderbilt Avenue, left-turned toward Forty-second Street. A swarm of cars trapped by a red light stopped us. We looked back. There was no sign of Shorty behind us but we both slid low in the seat. We stayed crouched down as the taxi streamed up Park Avenue.

The doorman at the Sultan hurried out as we squealed to a stop before its door. We didn't use him; we passed him in the middle of the sidewalk. We squeezed into an elevator whose doors were sliding together. The door to room 807 was standing open. A maid was running a carpet sweeper.

Jeff said, "Miss Kennedy . . . is she here?"

The maid said, "No. No, she's gone."

I sat on the arm of a chair. I was afraid that I would be violently sick. I held my breath, clenched my teeth. I tried not to think that Sally Kennedy was gone . . . tried to think where she might be; if she were still alive, where she might be. . . .

Jeff had lifted the phone from its cradle. He had told the operator how to get hold of Lieutenant Detective Hankins of the Homicide Bureau. He turned back to the maid.

"Were you here when Miss Kennedy left?"

The maid was looking at him with bewildered eyes. "Yes," she said. "She left about ten minutes ago."

The operator had Hankins on the phone. Jeff didn't have to do much talking. Hankins would be here; he was on his way. Jeff hung up. He moved quickly to the hall door and turned the key in its lock. He made a fast tour of the bedroom. He locked the living room windows and pulled down their shades. He switched on the overhead light.

The maid had stood still, watching dumbly. Now she made a dive for the locked door. Jeff caught her by the arm. She opened her mouth to scream.

"Wait," Jeff said. "Wait a minute. Listen."

Jeff talked fast. He told her about the plot against Sally Kennedy's life, how it was closing in upon her. He told her that the police were on their way and how, in the meantime, she might help. She sank down on the davenport and her face was filled with a helpless fright.

"I . . ." she said, "I . . . what can I do?"

"Have you any idea where Miss Kennedy went?"

"No."

"But she was leaving the hotel? She was dressed to go out?"

"She put her hat and coat on, yes."

"Did she say anything to you, anything at all?"

"No, nothing."

"Not even good morning? Did she ignore you?"

"Oh, Miss Kennedy never ignores me. She . . . she wouldn't do that."

"But she didn't speak to you this morning?"

"That was because she was busy. She was on the telephone and I went right on into the bedroom."

"She was talking to someone on the phone? And when she hung up she left right away?"

"She put on her things and went. I could see her from where I was making the bed."

"Was she in a hurry? Did she seem to be leaving because of the phone call?"

"Yes!" The maid looked at him in sudden surprise. "Yes, I think it was the phone call made her go."

"Did you hear anything she said?"

"I was in the bedroom."

"But you must have heard something. Didn't you hear anything?"

"I heard her say something about Thirty-fourth Street. She said it slow . . . like you do when you're writing something down. You know."

Jeff and I reached the phone at the same time. It stood on a small end table beside the davenport. There was no pencil, no pad, no scrap of paper on the table. There was nothing but an ashtray and a telephone. I sat beside it, I leaned down to look under the table. There was nothing there. I looked at the davenport. There was only a hatbox. I started to shove it away when I saw the writing on its top. I said, "Jeff."

It was only a scrawl, more doodling than writing. An elaborate number 8, a curlycue that might have been anything, then a heavily retraced 34. That was all.

"Eight . . . something . . . Thirty-fourth Street," Jeff said.

"East or West Thirty-fourth," I said.

"Yes," Jeff said. "West is in the Empire State Building. And East . . . I don't know. We'll have to cover them both." He turned to the maid. "What does Miss Kennedy look like?"

The fright sprang back into the maid's eyes. "You said you knew her . . . you said . . ."

"Tell us what she looks like."

"She's . . . she's tall. Taller than me and I'm almost five foot nine. She's got brown hair, nice brown hair that's short and kind of curly."

"What was she wearing?"

"Her coat is black . . . a plain black cloth coat, and her hat is one of them fancy ones. . . ."

There was a knock on the door and Hankins' voice roared through it. Jeff turned the key and the detective came into the room. He looked fine; he had never looked better to me. He only had time to take one step before Jeff turned him around and started him back toward the hall.

He said, "She's in one of two places. Did you bring anyone with you?"

"A couple of the boys are downstairs."

We were hurrying toward the elevators.

Jeff said, "We'll need more men. Quick."

"I can get them. I'm using a radio car."

The elevator dropped us to the lobby. I was a step ahead of Jeff

and Hankins as we started for the street. I saw the man rise from his chair. He had been reading a newspaper and now, still reading it, he took a few quick steps. He looked strange, ludicrous, reading as he walked. The paper seemed tremendous held in his left hand; it reached from halfway up his face down almost to his knees. That was because he was short.

He was coming directly at us, the paper still before him. I saw the picture of a snowdrift on the paper and the small black hole in the middle of it. The muzzle of a gun poked through the hole. I saw the paper stiffen in his grasp.

I took three running steps and threw myself headlong at the little man's knees, twisting sideways as I went through the air. I crashed into him as the shot rang out, and I saw Jeff in a headlong dive across me.

That was the last I saw before the blackness moved in.

Aunt Ellie was sitting in a chair beside a window. She was looking at me, smiling at me. I closed my eyes and opened them again. Aunt Ellie was still there.

"Aunt Ellie," I said, "where are you?"

"I'm in your bedroom, dear. I hope you don't mind, but I love to see people regain consciousness."

I sat up; I was in my bedroom.

"Aunt Ellie," I said, "Where's Jeff?"

"He'll be back. He's in the kitchen fixing something for you. Now you lie down and . . ."

"What time is it?"

"What time?" She fiddled with the locket watch pinned at her bosom. "Jeffie tells me you saved your life and his. He's tickled pink. He says . . ."

"Aunt Ellie, what time is it?"

"It's twenty-five minutes to eleven."

Jeff came into the bedroom with a tall glass of eggnog. He sat on the edge of the bed. "Drink all of it, Haila."

"Jeff, it's not eleven yet. . . ."

"I'll tell you about it while you drink this."

I started to drink, only to start Jeff talking.

"It's going to be all right," Jeff said. "Hankins has Thirty-fourth Street swarming with cops. He's got them at eight East and eight West. He's got some people from the hotel who know Sally Kennedy.

They'll find her, Haila. And Hankins will call us the minute they do."

I drank all of my drink. I leaned back and asked for a cigarette. Except for a spot on my skull that felt as though a pneumatic drill had spent the night there, I was in pretty fair shape. Jeff's brew and Hankins' efficiency had made a new girl of me.

"Tell me about Shorty, Jeff."

"You were rude to Shorty, dear. All he wanted to do was shoot us."

"I only wanted to save him from the electric chair."

"Well, you didn't. Shorty's in the clink now."

My aunt said, "Jeffie!"

"Yes, Aunt Ellie?"

"Haila!"

"Yes, Aunt Ellie?"

"You know," Aunt Ellie said, "I've been thinking."

Jeff looked incredulous; she was my aunt, on my mother's side, so I tried to look interested. I said, "Really, Aunt Ellie?"

"Yes, I've just been sitting here and thinking. And I'm not at all satisfied. East or west . . . why, that's the most important thing. If you don't have east or west right, you might as well not have the street. Now suppose I was to meet somebody and they said east and I went west? Why, we would never meet! It would cause a great deal of confusion. I might still be standing there, waiting and worrying. Believe me, if I made a note I would put down east or west . . . or anyway E or W . . . and make it good and plain."

"I'm sure you would, Aunt Ellie," I said. "But Sally Kennedy was in a hurry."

"If I was in a hurry I would be even more careful. Suppose I went east and the person meant west. . . ."

"Yes, Aunt Ellie, yes."

"But, Haila, dear, 8 and a scribble and a 34 . . . that might mean anything."

"Sally just happened to write it down because she had a pencil. She didn't make a note to take along with her. She expected to remember it."

Aunt Ellie was still too busy thinking to listen to me.

"It might be 34 East Eighth Street or . . ."

"The maid heard her say Thirty-fourth Street."

"Oh. Well, it might mean 8 and 34. You know, Eighth Street and Thirty-fourth Avenue . . . no, no, that's not it. But Eighth Avenue

and Thirty-fourth Street. That scribble might have been an and sign. Why, maybe . . ." Aunt Ellie giggled. "No, that's too silly."

She never would have forgiven me if I hadn't asked what was too silly. So I asked.

"Why, nobody would meet anybody there. I mean at the subway stop. Eighth Avenue and Thirty-fourth Street. Nobody would . . ."

Jeff took his chin off his elbow. He got up from the edge of the bed and looked down at Aunt Ellie. He took a slow step toward her.

"What did you say, Aunt Ellie?"

"I said nobody would meet anyone in a subway station. That would be silly. . . ."

"A subway station," Jeff said. "They used a subway station for Frank Lorimer. Eight and thirty-four. . . ." His voice rose almost to a shout. "The Eighth Avenue subway . . . the Thirty-fourth Street stop. . . ."

He snatched up his coat. His hat tumbled to the floor but he didn't stop to get it. I heard the apartment door slam. I flung myself out of bed and scrambled into my shoes. I grabbed for my coat. The door opened before I reached it and Jeff was back.

"Joyce," he said. "He's in front of the house. No, Aunt Ellie, don't move! He's watching."

"Jeff," I said, "did he see you?"

"No. Aunt Ellie, you stay there in that chair. Keep talking. Pretend you're talking to us. Talk your fool head off. We'll go out the back."

We started out of the room.

"Well," Aunt Ellie said, "did I ever tell you about the time I ate too much. . . ."

We were across the living room. Jeff wrenched open the French door and then Aunt Ellie's voice was too far behind us to hear. We climbed the rear fence into the back yard of the big commercial building behind our house. We ran through an open door into a kitchen, through a restaurant and out onto Sixth Avenue. The subway entrance was thirty feet away.

We raced down the steps. Jeff jammed two nickels into the slot and we swung through the turnstile. We missed one train by seconds; we had to wait two minutes for the next. The train rushed through the tunnel. A stop at Fourteenth Street, at Twenty-third, then we

were pulling into Thirty-fourth. I saw a watch on a man's wrist. It was eleven minutes to eleven.

We were first through the opening doors. A mass of people waiting on the platform surrounded us. For a moment we were caught helplessly in the crushing movement of the crowd. Then, as if by magic, the mob dispersed. The long white-tiled platform was quiet and nearly deserted. Jeff's hand was on my arm.

"We'll take this platform first," he said. "Then the express and the downtown local."

We moved to the track-edge of the station and turned our backs on it. I raised myself on tiptoe, searching the length of platform from end to end, my eyes darting over the people left on it.

There weren't many women. Two giggling girls in polo coats and bobby socks punching at a chewing gum machine. A tiny, lost-looking girl with a bulging suitcase puzzling over the arrowed signs painted on the walls. A red-headed woman powdering her nose at the mirror above a chocolate dispenser. Down at the far end of the platform, a placid, middle-aged woman sitting on a bench, her hat and purse beside her. In front of the magazine stand another woman, her back toward us. She turned and we could see that she was old, very old, her face a network of wrinkles, her hair snowy white.

That was all. No Sally Kennedy. No one who could possibly be the girl we were seeking.

We about-faced to glance across the tracks at the center platform. There were more people there. An express pulled in and cut them from our view.

We started for the stairs to the underpass. I took one last searching look up and down the local platform. The girl with her suitcase was still there, the two gigglers. At the far end of the platform, the woman on the bench. And not far from her a girl.

We both started forward at the same time. Only a few feet from the bench stood Sally Kennedy.

Even so far away we could tell it was she. The tall, slim figure, the sleek black coat. And, as we came closer and could see her face, we knew for sure. The brown hair, short and curly, cropping out from under a bright green hat.

A train roared in beside us and we started running. It was no good. The train stopped, its doors slid open. The crowds spewed

out of the cars, swallowing us in their midst, swallowing Sally Kennedy, too.

I caught a moment's glimpse of her. She was standing beside the bench, holding onto it with one hand, the other fumbling with her purse. I saw her bend down over the woman on the bench, I saw her lips move as she spoke to her.

A man brushed against me, blocking my view. The crowd milled about us; we had to fight not to lose ground. Jeff threw his shoulder against the wall of people and we moved slowly forward. Then the crowd thinned and cleared. I could see the bench again, the woman sitting on it. But Sally Kennedy was gone.

Jeff had seen that, too. He was swearing under his breath as he stared about him, searching.

"Jeff! That woman on the bench, she spoke to Sally."

The woman looked startled as we converged upon her and shot out our question. Then she smiled.

"Yes," she said. Her voice was sweet and rather high. "I know who you mean. She asked me how to get to Fifty-ninth Street. I told her she'd have to cross to the other platform, that this was the downtown side."

Jeff grasped my hand and pulled me toward the stair. We ran down into the tunnel that was the underpass. "You take the local platform, Haila, just in case . . . I'll take the express."

He was up the center stairway and out of sight. I ran on to the end of the tunnel. I took the flight of stairs there three at a time. But I was too late.

The train was already in, its passengers pushing into the cars. I raced across the platform and pushed in with them. The door started to slide closed behind me before I realized what I had done.

The girl had not been Sally Kennedy; we had been wrong. She would not have come downtown to Thirty-fourth Street only to ride back to Fifty-ninth. She would have come to meet someone, she would have waited until . . . I turned and struggled toward the door. I had to get out; our search had to begin all over again.

The door was almost closed. I lunged and stuck out my hand. The rubber buffing of the door slapped against it. I pushed with all my might and squeezed out of the car. Behind me the door closed with a jar, as if outraged by my interference.

The train moved out of the station, uncovering an express that stood between me and Jeff. I scanned the platform I was on. There were a lot of women, women with coats of all colors and hair of all colors. But no tall girl in a black coat with brown, curly hair.

There were no trains at all in the station now. I looked across the island that was the middle platform. Jeff wasn't on it. Across all four tracks I could see the uptown local side. I saw the middle-aged woman still on the bench, but I couldn't find Jeff. He might be in the underpass, coming to meet me.

I started to turn toward the stairs, and stopped. My eyes were drawn back to the woman on the bench. What was it about her? I had looked at her several times, I had talked to her. There was nothing to make me hesitate now and yet . . . there *was* something. There was something about her that held me there, rooted to the spot.

I stared across at her so intently that my eyes burned. I gritted my teeth in an effort to think . . . to know what it was that had attracted my attention and this feeling of great urgency. The woman still sat quietly where we had first seen her. She had removed the purse from the seat beside her, she had put on her hat. She had . . .

I knew then. I looked frantically for Jeff.

The woman was wearing a red hat. A bright red hat festooned with tiny, jet-black feathers. A hat that I had seen one time before. It had been sitting perkily upon the coffee table in Sally Kennedy's hotel room.

The woman had brown curly hair. She was wearing a black coat and she was tall. But she was middle-aged, she was in her fifties. The girl we were looking for was young . . . she was going to inherit a fortune on her next birthday, she was . . .

People jostled by me and I scarcely felt them. No one had ever said on which birthday Sally Kennedy was to inherit the Hiram Kennedy millions. We had taken for granted that it would be the one on which she reached her majority and we had been wrong.

It came rushing back to me now, all of it. Thelma Kennedy's story, the things she had told us. That she had married Hiram's young brother . . . his *kid* brother . . . younger than Hiram by thirty years. And Sally was Hiram's child. She would be the same age as her uncle, she would be a contemporary of Louis Kennedy, and of his widow, Thelma. Like Thelma, she would be middle-aged. . . .

She was standing up now, moving toward the tracks. Desperately, I looked for Jeff. And then, in the mass of faces surrounding Sally Kennedy, I saw one that I knew.

It was the round, flushed face of a country squire, the face of a man we had met in a lodge on a mountain top. He was walking slowly, cautiously pushing his bulky body through the crowd. The hat was pulled low on Merrill's head, but I could see the bright, silver-white fringe of his hair. I could see his eyes, fixed on Sally Kennedy, as he moved closer to her.

I turned and wrestled my way to the stairs. I flung myself down them, banging into people, elbowing by them. I was in the tunnel of the underpass, racing through it. I could hear the muted sound of a train approaching the station.

I ran up the stairway. The train, just slackening its speed, was sliding along beside the local platform. I saw Sally Kennedy. Her eyes wide with horrified disbelief, her face twisted in fear, she watched the struggle of the two men near her.

Jeff sprawled backward as Merrill shook him off with a desperate contortion of his great body. Merrill turned away. He took three short tottering steps before he plunged onto the tracks before the wheels of the train.

I lunged through the silent, horror-stricken crowd toward Sally Kennedy. Her hands were covering her eyes, her lips were moving soundlessly.

"Miss Kennedy," I said.

"No," she whispered, "no, it wasn't. It wasn't Louis, it couldn't have been Louis."

Jeff was at my side.

"Haila," he said, "you take care of Miss Kennedy."

"I will," I said.

18

CARL DOBBS TURNED AWAY FROM Sally Kennedy and looked at me. He settled back in his chair and snapped open his cigar case. Mr. Dobbs was making an effort to

calm himself. He had had a bad time of it.

"It wasn't until after you left my office," he said, "that I began to worry. If the two of you should be right . . . if there was one chance in a million that Sally's life was in jeopardy, she should be told about it. She should be warned and watched."

The lawyer looked across the room again at Sally Kennedy. He seemed to be rechecking the fact that she was really safe, sound and sitting comfortably in room 807 of the Sultan Hotel. His lips wrinkled into the nearest thing to a genuine smile that I had seen on his face, and he shook a finger at Miss Kennedy in mock severity.

"My dear," he said, "if you only knew what I've been through since then. Not being able to find you anyplace. I must have made a hundred phone calls. I was frantic."

Miss Kennedy smiled at him. "I'm sorry, Carl. I just suddenly decided to run out to Long Island and spend the night with Beth Goodrich. I didn't bother to tell anyone. All I did was phone Claire Cortland and tell her a little white lie to excuse myself from tea."

"But my messages," Dobbs said plaintively. "You must have got my messages when you came back to the hotel this morning."

"Yes, Carl, dozens of them. But then that girl phoned and begged me to meet her at the subway station. She sounded so desperately in trouble that I decided just to let you wait. Of course, I thought you only wanted to see me about business, Carl, dear. You've always been just as frantic to get business done."

"I wanted," Carl Dobbs said in a wounded voice, "to save your life."

"Well," Miss Kennedy said, "it's been saved now. And it was Frank, Frank Lorimer. . . ." She lifted her hand to cover her eyes.

"Miss Kennedy," I said quickly, "you didn't suspect anything these last few days? About Louis and his gang?"

"No, nothing. That truck that nearly hit me . . . I thought, of course, it *was* an accident. How could I have suspected?"

"But Frank Lorimer must have tried to warn you."

"Yes, I'm sure he tried. But the Sultan is such a respectable hotel. It's likely that Frank couldn't even get past the doorman . . . if he was as disreputable looking as he used to be."

"But he must have tried to telephone you," Dobbs said. "He must have left messages for you, just as I did."

Miss Kennedy shook her head. "No, there were no messages. Oh, I've been gadding all around town, I haven't been in much. But my secretary was usually here. She would have told me if Frank had . . .

"Your secretary?" I said.

"Yes, Miss Vinson. I was so fortunate about her. The day my boat docked a lovely young lady offered to work for me. She isn't here just now. She went off someplace yesterday afternoon, but I expect that . . ."

"Miss Kennedy," I said, "this lovely young secretary . . . what color is her hair?"

"Red," Sally Kennedy said. "A perfectly beautiful shade of red."

I told them about Red. I told them how she must have kept Frank Lorimer away from Miss Kennedy, how she had kept Jeff and me stalemated by impersonating her employer. When I had finished with Red there was no chance of her ever getting her job back.

There was a ratatat on the door and Jeff walked in. He nodded briefly to the lawyer, then went to Miss Kennedy. He sat down beside her.

She said, "Louis . . ."

Jeff said, "He was killed instantly."

Miss Kennedy turned away for a moment. "I suppose it's better that he should have killed himself," she said quietly. "I suppose it's better that way."

"I think so, my dear," Mr. Dobbs said.

"To think that for all these years he's been planning my death, that he's thought of nothing else since he staged his fake drowning in the Sound. . . ." She stopped suddenly and her eyes opened wide. "Carl!"

"Yes, Sally?" the lawyer said.

"Do you remember my riding accident, Carl, just after father passed away?" She turned to us. "Louis and I were out riding. I was thrown and Louis' horse nearly trampled me . . . nearly trampled me to death. Frank was back with us then, he'd come for just a little while. He never believed that it was an accident. He kept insinuating to me that Louis' horse hadn't shied and stampeded accidentally, that Louis had goaded him into trampling me. Well, Frank was right, wasn't he? Louis did try to kill me once before. And then, when Frank saw him this time, he must have known. . . ."

"Yes," Jeff said, "that's the only explanation. Louis was supposed to be dead. But Frank must have seen him and recognized him. He must have known that the only reason Louis would have pretended to be dead was in order to try to kill you again. Frank did everything he could. He tried to see you and had no luck. He tried to see Mr. Dobbs, but Mr. Dobbs was out all day. He couldn't go to the police because he'd jumped his parole. So he came to us."

"Fortunately for me," Miss Kennedy said. "Otherwise Louis' plan would have succeeded. It almost should have succeeded," she added grimly, "all the years that he spent arranging it."

"He didn't expect it to take years," Jeff said. He rose and walked back and forth across the room. "You ruined all his plans, Miss Kennedy, when you went abroad in 1938."

"Yes, and it must have broken his black heart when I was interned in Austria. I'm so sorry that the war proved such an inconvenience for Louis . . . having to wait so long for me to come home so that he might murder me. How he must have worried that I wouldn't get here before this birthday! Unless I were to die before tomorrow, he would get nothing at all, you know, he and Thelma."

"We know Thelma," Jeff said.

"Now I see! Of course! With Louis pretending to be dead, and with me dead, Thelma would get everything. I suppose it was arranged to look as if Thelma had had no part in this . . . she must have provided herself with an absolute alibi."

"Yes," I said. "She's at her hairdresser's right now. Probably sitting under a dryer reading a movie magazine."

"Then, Miss Kennedy," Jeff said, "your death was to look accidental. That was an added protection. There was to be no question of murder. But if something should slip . . . well, Thelma had her alibi and Louis was apparently dead."

"Darling," I said, "what about Kramer and the others?"

"Kramer?" Dobbs said. "Who is Kramer?"

"One of the gang Louis needed to pull off his plan," Jeff said. "The police have Shorty and Joyce, Haila. And they're on their way to Chappawan Lodge now. Of course it was Louis who actually killed Frank Lorimer, but the others have enough charges against them to add up to years and years at Ossining."

"My dear boy," Miss Kennedy said to Jeff, "won't you stop roam-

ing about and sit down? You've earned the right to be comfortable."

"Is something bothering you, Jeff?" I asked.

"No," Jeff said, "nothing at all."

But he kept on pacing. I tried to catch his eye and he avoided me. "Darling," I said, "did you know that Red was planted here as Miss Kennedy's secretary?"

"I imagined she was."

"And it must have been she," Sally Kennedy said, "who called me this morning. She was very convincing. She said she was from my detention camp in Austria, that she was in horrible trouble and that I must come to her at once. After years over there, one doesn't think it strange to meet someone in a subway station. The subway . . ." She stopped. It was Frank Lorimer she was thinking of, not Louis Kennedy. Tears started to her eyes, and she shook them back. "Did you see Frank at all? Did you speak to him? After he left us, I neglected him. But I was away so much . . . of course, that's no excuse."

"Frank got along all right," Jeff said. "He liked the way he got along. You and I mightn't have, but Frank did."

"I think I know what you mean," Miss Kennedy said. "I know. . . ." She looked up at Jeff. "Young man, why are you so restless? Won't you please sit down?"

"All right," Jeff said, "I'll sit down. And maybe a drink would be good for what ails me."

"Why, of course!" Miss Kennedy said.

"A drink!" Mr. Dobbs said. "That would be fine."

Jeff took over. He reached for the phone. "I'll order," he said. "Miss Kennedy, what would you like?"

"Whiskey and water, I think."

"Haila?"

"The same."

"And you, Mr. Dobbs," Jeff said. "What's yours?"

"A martini, if you don't mind," the lawyer said. "A martini made with sherry."

Miss Kennedy laughed. "I could have told you that. It's always the same thing for Carl. And, young man," she said to Jeff, "what will you have?"

Jeff put the phone back on the desk. "On second thought," he said slowly, "I don't believe I want a drink."

"My dear boy, what is it?" Miss Kennedy looked closely at Jeff. She put her hand on his arm. "What are you worried about? Everything is all right now. Isn't it, Carl?"

"It seems so to me," the lawyer said. "Everything is taken care of, we've settled everything."

"Have we?" Jeff asked. He turned to Miss Kennedy. "Who paid Frank Lorimer the monthly pension your father willed him? Who, therefore, knew where he lived and was able to get to his boarding house before we did? Who bribed the landlady to lie about Frank, to say that she'd never heard of him? Who got her out of town before we could question her some more?"

"Well," Miss Kennedy said, "perhaps . . ."

Jeff went on. "Who was it," he said, "that tipped Red off that we were on our way to the Sultan Hotel, who told her to be all ready to intercept us there and lead us on a wild goose chase to Chappawan Lodge? Who was it that was correlating all the movements of the gang, giving the right orders at the right times?"

"Louis, undoubtedly," Mr. Dobbs said. "It had to be Louis."

Jeff shook his head. "Louis wasn't in a position to do all that. There was only one person who was. He was in the Belfast Bar the first time Haila and I went there. He knew then what Frank was afraid of, Frank had told him. He tried to buy Frank off, or scare him off and he failed. So he watched Frank until he left the bar and then he gave the order for Frank's death."

Miss Kennedy leaned forward toward Jeff. "But who," she said, "who . . ."

"I didn't see him in the bar that afternoon," Jeff said. "He was sitting in one of the booths with a friend, a short, squat man, a member of the gang. He sent that short, squat man to the bar to order him a martini. Not a martini made with vermouth. A martini made with sherry."

Carl Dobbs put his cigar carefully on an ashtray. He said, "Are you saying . . . are you implying that . . . but, no. No, that's impossible. You're an intelligent young man, you . . ."

"It was you in the bar, Mr. Dobbs," Jeff said. "You told us that Frank Lorimer had tried to reach you, but that you had been out. That wasn't quite true. Frank *did* reach you. He told you that he had seen Louis Kennedy and that that could only mean that Miss Kennedy was to die. You laughed at him, of course, but . . . if I'm

wrong, Mr. Dobbs, why are you heading for the door?"

The lawyer kept on moving away from us.

"It's ludicrous, it's fantastic . . . Sally, you don't believe . . . you surely don't believe . . ."

He was two steps from the door now. He lunged for it; he clawed it open, and he was gone. Jeff watched him go.

"It's all right," he said. "Hankins is waiting for Mr. Dobbs at the elevators."

Miss Kennedy turned to face us. "Do you mean," she said, "that Carl . . . that it was Carl Dobbs who planned all this . . . that it was he who . . ."

"Yes, Miss Kennedy," Jeff said. "You'll have to get yourself a new lawyer, I'm afraid."

She closed her eyes. When she opened them, she tried to smile at us. "You two people," she said, "the two of you . . ." Then she did smile, successfully. "And do you realize that I don't even know your names?"

"Troy," Jeff said. "Jeff and Haila Troy."

"Jeff and Haila. How do you do, Jeff and Haila."

"How do you do," I said. "We're awfully pleased to meet you."

"Yes," Jeff said, "for a while we were afraid we mightn't have the pleasure. How are you, Miss Kennedy?"

"I'm fine, thank you," she said. She took a deep, deep breath. "Thank you very, very much."

THE END

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